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Jennifer L. Lauren

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CHALLENGING THE NATION:  
ENGLISH WOMEN'S NOVELS, 1915-1927

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Jennifer L. Lauren

December 2012

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Jennifer L. Lauren

2012

CHALLENGING THE NATION:  
ENGLISH WOMEN'S NOVELS, 1915-1927

By

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Approved November 26, 2012

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## ABSTRACT

### CHALLENGING THE NATION: ENGLISH WOMEN'S NOVELS, 1915-1927

By

Jennifer L. Lauren

December 2012

Dissertation supervised by Judy Suh, Ph.D.

In World War I and the decade following, England faced the unraveling of its Empire and waning global power. A proliferation of nationalist rhetoric marks this period, much of it centered on ideas of England's racial superiority and women's role in maintaining it. The white, middle-class, English woman's body emblemized Mother England and occupied the center of intense anxiety about sexuality and its perceived connection to national stability and supremacy. Woolf, Warner, and West penned their novels in the face of this rhetoric, recognizing the possibilities this era was affording women socially, politically, and culturally. *The Voyage Out* (1915), *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), *Lolly Willowes* (1926), and *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* (1927) present narrative strategies that critique early twentieth-century English imperial nationalism and offer new possibilities for women to achieve autonomy. Woolf, West, and Warner focus

on domesticity as one of the primary sites of female indoctrination into the nation and expose its normally invisible imperial underpinnings. Each author claims that the imperial nation informs the gender roles performed in middle-class English homes and that those roles simultaneously support the imperial nation. Additionally, the texts reveal that the categories of race, gender, and class in England during this time emerge through the presence of the imperial Other. Throughout, each text also focuses sharply on the English pastoral. The locus of poignant national nostalgia, the rural English landscape functions in national rhetoric as the symbol of the country's values in ways that mirror the middle-class English woman's symbolic function.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Cliff, Dawn, Rick, Benjamin, and Clifford, my family who always believe in me.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I owe my first debt of gratitude to Duquesne University for granting me the fellowships that allowed me to pursue a Ph.D. and for providing outstanding resources for scholarship, including the Gumberg Library. I have always been and will continue to remain grateful to the Department of English faculty who offered good counsel in their classrooms and in their offices and continually pushed my thinking. I thank Dr. Magali Michael for introducing me to postcolonial literature and for telling me that I had a knack for it, which set me on my path. Thanks to Dr. Linda Kinnahan for teaching me about British modernism and for leading me to Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rebecca West. I thank these exemplary professors for their strong academic influence, for their immense personal influence, and for the many hours they spent reading chapter drafts on my behalf. Finally, I can never thank Dr. Judy Suh enough for overseeing my dissertation. Her patience, her precision with direction, her depth of knowledge, and her vision that was larger than mine will all serve as models for me for years to come. This project owes much to her.

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Finally, I wish to thank my mother and father, Dawn and Cliff Atkins, my cheerleaders who wanted this as much as I did. Thanks to my grandfather, Bill Chidsey, for always being there. My partner, Rick Myers, deserves thanks for providing a home for us in my period of fiscal dearth, for tolerating weekends and evenings alone, and for understanding how much this project means to me even though the process presented challenges. Thanks to my young son, Benjamin Jackson, who reminded me to close my email and focus on my work and who, on at least one occasion, dragged me to my desk so I could write for a few more hours before bed. His support and cheerful encouragement made me proud and pushed me to work harder to make him proud in turn. I am surrounded by love and these pages embody that.

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# INTRODUCTION

In a poem titled “Anna Liffey,” Irish poet Eavan Boland writes of an aging woman who stands in the doorway of a house trying to find language in which she can express herself, an effort impeded by the fact that the lexicon excludes her, a woman past the ability to bear children, whom words like “summer,” “sexual,” and “ready” (117-18) no longer reference. Remembering her past, the narrator recalls, “My country took hold of me./My children were born” (50-51). The narrator implies that her identity materializes when her life aligns with needs of the nation, but, when she no longer serves the nation’s purpose, her identity disintegrates. Boland’s poem wrestles with the connection between womanhood and nationhood, and the narrator, for whom it has taken a “lifetime” to piece together “fragments of a life” (44-46), compares the facts of her body with its role in the country in which she lives. She feels alienated from the nation because of how her body is understood within national discourse. She finds that she has no room for herself; her body is “a source,” and “nothing more” (170). The narrator obliquely compares herself to Anna Liffey, the woman for whom the river is named (“The river took its name from the land/The land takes its name from a woman” [7-8]), and towards the end of the poem reveals that “It has taken me/All my strength to do this./Becoming a figure in a poem./Usurping a name and a theme” (59-62). Through the act of writing, the narrator recovers the name given to the river and claims a narrative space for herself within the nation. But, by admitting that it has taken all of her strength to do so, she reveals the vast and nearly impervious power that the nation wields over her. The modern nation is in many ways too unified to challenge easily. As Anthony Smith

has argued, the modern nation is a product of the industrial age with a unified legal code of common rights and duties; a unified economy; a fairly compact territory in a world of similarly compact nations; a single political culture and public, mass education and media system to socialize future generations of citizens (*National Identity*, 69).

Boland's poem throws into relief the role of the modern Western nation in women's lives, posing questions about what it means that women symbolize the nation but cannot see themselves reflected in it. "Anna Liffey," written in the last years of the twentieth century, serves as a fitting introduction to my project because it neatly and succinctly frames some of the questions that women writers began to ask in the first half of the century, responding to the waxing feminist movement and the waning expanse of empire. How, Boland's poem asks, does the nation alienate women's bodies from women themselves? And how do history and language function within the nation to shape the narrator's sense of identity? This dissertation investigates the ways in which modernist English women novelists imbedded these same questions about the nation in their texts, drawing them out in narrative form, and opening up the door for women to see more clearly their position in their culture. My project examines the narrative strategies used by Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Sylvia Townsend Warner to explore and challenge the role women play in the modern, English imperial nation in terms of its rhetoric and its tangible, material life.

## A Cultural and Historical Overview of Early Twentieth-Century England

The novels analyzed in this dissertation, published between 1915 and 1927, were written<sup>1</sup> either just before the outbreak of World War I, during the war, or in the decade immediately following, during what historian Eric Hobsbawm calls an “Age of Catastrophe” (7). Social and political turbulence caused by the war itself heavily mark this period, as does a simultaneous shift in ideology and many important cultural practices. The war left England’s economy in shambles and also destabilized its position as a world power, leaving English citizens to question their place in the changing global scene. Before the war, English people thought of their country as a space inviolate. Philip Gibbs argues that the post-war populace

had been taught to believe that the whole object of life was to reach out to beauty and love, and that mankind, in its progress to perfection, had killed the beast instinct, cruelty, blood-lust, the primitive, savage law of survival by tooth and claw and club and ax. All poetry, all art, all religion had preached this gospel and this promise. Now that ideal was broken like a china vase dashed to the ground. (qtd in Fussell, 8)

Literary historian Paul Fussell notes that the war left few certainties intact and the loss of innocence, or perhaps naiveté, reverberated through English culture, “reversing the idea of progress” (10). Horrific images and stories from the trenches clashed directly with Victorian and Edwardian idealism, and the hefty costs incurred by the war, economically and socially, rattled the country’s foundation. The fraction of men who returned home to

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<sup>1</sup> Even though *The Voyage Out* was published in 1915, after the war began, Woolf began writing it several years earlier.

England returned as broken men, in spirit if not in body, and the country mourned loss as it had never experienced before.

Threats to England from further overseas coalesced in the first decades of the twentieth century, as well, as unrest in the colonies amplified, shaking England's foundation in more subtle but serious ways. Colonies such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada began to object to what they characterized as British mismanagement during the war with regard to military personnel. Philippa Levine also points out that anti-colonial nationalism gained significant strength in many colonies during and after the war, Ireland and India in particular. Levine argues that, "Although the British had largely dismissed colonial resistance in the nineteenth century as local and tribal, it became much harder to deny nationalist leanings in the twentieth century" (*The British Empire*, 168). The shadows of the impending diffusion of power were evident, at the latest, by the First World War. Powell also situates the Boer war (1899-1902) as a turning point in the history of the Empire because it foreshadows its decline, a point at which British nationalism as propagated by the government looked increasingly inward even while imperialist expansion continued, especially as threats on the continent became more pointed towards the onset of the war, heightening the sense of national anxiety.

The Empire occupied the center of English nationalism in these years (in addition to the Empire's obvious importance to England economically and politically), and the threat of losing this stronghold on the globe sent tremors of uncertainty throughout the country.<sup>2</sup> Powell argues that "the empire in particular was crucial to the idea of a British identity and to the self-image of Britishness that was formed in the eighteenth and

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<sup>2</sup> While the term *British* indicates a collectivity between England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, Englishness should be assumed as the real subject when discussing Britishness because England was the center of power in this conglomeration and will be treated as such throughout this project.

nineteenth centuries” (*Nationhood and Identity* XI). Edward Said notes that “England of course is in an imperial class by itself, bigger, grander, more imposing than any other” (*Culture and Imperialism*, xxii). This might and grandeur permeated the minds of English citizens in the early-twentieth century who still embraced the Victorian idea that Britain, “because of its own inherent qualities, has a unique and civilizing duty and dominion over the regions under imperial dominion and otherwise” (Powell 104). The subtext of this ideology is that the qualities of England’s middle- and upper-class citizens have earned England the right to expand its borders across a huge portion of the globe: 47 territories and 400 million people by the beginning of the twentieth century (Levine 103). Many English citizens identified themselves so closely with the Empire that the domestic nation became secondary, which is one reason why modern English nationalism and imperialism cannot be discussed separately. In *Propaganda and Empire*, John M. MacKenzie argues that, “Even if [the English] knew little and cared less about imperial philosophies or colonial territories, nonetheless imperial status set them apart, and united a set of national ideas which coalesced in the last three decades of the nineteenth century” (2). Empire is a crucial component of English nationalism in this era.

Because of its importance in unifying a set of national ideals, imperialism—“the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory” (Said, *Culture* 9)—must be studied as an essential aspect of English culture in this particular period. Official and cultural propaganda that helped to formulate English imperial nationalism infiltrated nearly every aspect of life in England. MacKenzie explains that in these years, imperial nationalism, compounded of monarchism, militarism, and Social Darwinism, provided the avenue through which the English

defined their superiority in the world. Imperial nationalism found mouthpieces in cinema, broadcasting, churches, youth organizations, rituals and ceremonies, the educational system, and juvenile literature. As Mackenzie notes, English “patriarchal intentions” and the English “world view” infiltrated all of the varied institutions of British life (253), whether it appears so or not (many facts become naturalized and, as such, harder to discern). As schools, movies, magazines, and other cultural and political outlets at that time indicate, English imperial nationalism also asserts a God-bestowed duty to spread a civilizing influence to the natives in other lands. Government propaganda and the politics and pageantry of the imperial state encouraged the sense of belonging to a world-wide imperial community. Imperial sentiment also existed as a more spontaneous feeling in the minds of the people, reinforced by economic self-interest, by family ties and by the popular culture that framed their daily lives (Powell, *Nationhood* 118).

The threat of a weakening empire created a push to preserve at the very least the appearance of British supremacy and to remind citizens of their God-given right to it. During this turbulent time, the nation engaged in “Empire strengthening,” as Barbara Bush calls it. Bush argues that the war “enhanced” the Empire’s importance and popularity and “visions of a more participatory and inclusive Empire were articulated through popular culture and politics” (79). Similarly, Powell notes that “enthusiasm for the empire could be used as an integrating force to strengthen the solidarity of the nation at times of internal unrest and external threat” (112). The new mass media channels and other tools of propaganda fostered this amplification of “Empire consciousness,” as Bush coins it. The institution of Empire Day, for example, stands as a marked governmental effort to infuse the British population with national pride and bolster uniformity and



strength of identity by invoking the Empire in the time of growing crisis. The first Empire Day celebration took place in 1902, designed to remind citizens of their grand imperial heritage (Powell 124). Parliament passed The Aliens Act in 1905 and the Defense of the Realm Act in 1914, demonstrating the anxiety English governmental officials felt about external threats since each measure attempted to mitigate perceived threats to the nation's safety; the Acts demonstrate England's desire to preserve its identity as the superior global entity and yet cope with the imminent threat of invasion and the possible dilution of the English "race."

Public exhibitions in England also celebrated the Empire and helped to further consolidate English identity as directly connected to it. The two Post-Impressionist shows in London in 1910 and 1912 formally introduced Britain to the primitive (Gilmore, "Virginia" 129), along with London's Imperial International Exhibition in 1909 and the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. Mark Wollaeger argues that "[. . .] imperial exhibitions collapsed the distance between the periphery and the center by reproducing versions of colonized life on English soil [. . .]" and

materially reproduced the operations of power by bringing actual bodies back to England, where they became human exhibits within reconstructed native villages. As many have shown, such exhibitions were designed to consolidate belief in imperial superiority [. . .] (46)

By showcasing racial difference, the English deepened their belief in their own racial superiority. Similarly, Wollaeger notes, postcards depicting imperial scenes from all over the globe gained wide popularity, an example of the ways in which the rise of new mass media contributed to the dissemination of imperial propaganda (44). Wollaeger argues

that “widely-collected colonial postcards contributed to imperial stereotyping by disseminating primitivist images of indigenous peoples during the most jingoistic period of England’s global dominance” (Wollaeger 44). The depictions of the primitive strengthened notions of imperial supremacy while celebrating the wide expanse of the Empire.

Another key feature of this historical period is the feminist movement’s progress and its subsequent backslide brought about by the onset of World War I. In the years leading up to the war, the suffrage movement gained traction; women earned the right to attend leading medical schools, women could earn a living in ways besides domestic servitude, and many found employment in the cities in offices and factories. The war, however, stunted all of this progress. Jane Marcus argues that World War I “wiped out women’s culture,” noting, for example, that “at the height of the suffrage movement in 1911 there were twenty-one regular feminist periodicals in England, a women’s press, a feminist bookshop, the Fawcett Library, and a bank run by and for women. The war decimated that impressive coalition” (“Asylums” 136). The war and its calamities consumed most of England’s citizens’ attention, and petitioning for equal rights as men died across the channel seemed frivolous or even semi-treasonous.

The war also brought about a staunch desire among citizens to return to all that was “best” about England, which many people defined as the traditional family with traditional gender roles within it, and popular sentiment viewed the fight for women’s rights and the growing visibility of lesbian sexuality as direct threats to the country’s foundation. Bush notes that “Domesticity, marriage, and appropriate gender roles remained central to imperial stability” (85). Moreover, the “new woman” of this era

challenged traditional gender roles and, by extension, traditional notions of the English family, the cornerstone of English imperial culture, as Anthony Smith argues. Characterized by Marianne Dekoven as “independent, educated, (relatively) sexually liberated, [and] oriented more toward productive life in the public sphere than toward reproductive life in the home” (174), women of this period experienced new social mobility, but with it came a backlash that asserted tradition more feverishly, as evidenced by the many obscenity trials after the war in which women faced public and legal rebuke for their behavior or for their fiction. In *Lesbian Empire*, Gay Wachman discusses the social implications of several trials, notably the 1918 Noel-Pemberton-Billing case in which Maud Allan stood trial for being a lesbian and thus a “moral pervert,” and the 1928 obscenity trial involving Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. In view of these lawsuits against women, Wachman posits that the idea that middle- and upper-class white women have no sexual desire “was basic to imperialist patriarchal hegemony” (10), which explains why “Maud Allen’s reputation as an icon of active female sexuality made her the perfect vehicle for [an] attack on the decadent forces of liberalism, pacifism, perversion, and treachery,” forces that many English citizens believed betrayed the Empire (15). If women were not in the home breeding English citizens, then they were, nationalist sentiment asserted, destroying the country’s system of deep-seated values. In short, and by most accounts, women’s sexuality sat directly in the middle of a constellation of anxieties relating to the English culture, the English nation, and the British Empire.

Anxiety about losing key elements of national imperial identity, the Empire, and perceived racial purity generated an increased celebration of those very things, alongside

formalized regulation to minimize the loss. Subsequently, the fear of invasion created a new sense of common unity and, according to Powell,

[ . . . ] a cruder race patriotism came to the surface in the eugenics movement and in the language prejudices of the time, including a heightened anti-Semitism and increased hostility in some areas (like the East End of London) to foreign immigrants and refugees. (124)

The eugenics movement and other forms of prejudice that Powell addresses were evident on a broader scale as well. Lucy Bland argues that the eugenics movement orchestrated a “moral panic” in the face of a national decline in birth rate and characterized “fit reproduction” as the “racial instinct,” thereby appropriating sexual desire for national interest. Patricia Juliana Smith notes that, “In the 1890s and 1900s, the growing influence of eugenics, with its focus on selective breeding as a vital component to ‘national efficiency,’ coincided with the increasing challenges to the British Empire from Germany, the United States, and Japan” (53). Eugenics sharpened the idea that the English were a superior “race” and the presumed authority vested in the scientists who promoted theories of eugenics helped to give credence to the notion that the true English character must be bred through the country’s most exemplary citizens. Wachman argues that “the myth of feminine innocence—that middle- and upper-class women have no sexual desire—was basic to imperialist patriarchal hegemony” (*Lesbian Empire*, 10). The rise of eugenics and the characterization of colonial natives and members of other “races” as hyper-sexual augmented notions that middle- and upper-class English women had no sexual desire. The more the Other was classified as degenerate, the more Englishness could be sanitized, and the female body is the vehicle through which such cleansing takes

place, literally as bearer of the “race” and figuratively as representative of the nation and its ideals. One result of this characterization of the “racial instinct” was that “sexual activity of the so-called dysgenic in England itself, be they the working class, ‘feeble-minded,’ ‘feckless’ or non-white, was by definition deviant” (Bland 296). This fear of dysgenic breeding manifested itself in several ways. Certainly a heightened sense of the “Other” as dark and menacing has always been apparent in the colonial relationship but, with the rise of eugenics, the lower classes and the “deviants” within the nation were now also the Other and thus relegated to the nation’s margins.

The field of sexology, which sought to classify sexual behavior, also heavily influenced English culture in the early part of the twentieth century. According to Lucy Bland, “while eugenics fed into the politics of fertility control, sexology, the new ‘science of sex,’ had begun to categorize different sexual behaviors and identities” (307). Sexology pathologized homosexual acts, for example, and Bland also notes that sexology launched an attack on the spinster, citing her celibacy as aberrant because, as sexologists believed, motherhood was “essential” for all women (257-9). While eugenics defined the “racial instinct” and thus fostered notions of exclusion, sexology helped to reinforce these ideas by attacking those who did not participate in proper English breeding. Thus, the burgeoning field of sexology dovetailed with eugenics in this period to further define English normalcy and quarantine behaviors that were considered aberrant and threatening to the national character, with the homosexual, the lesbian, and the spinster as the prime targets. While homosexuality could undermine the patriarchal English family, Bush notes that single women also appeared sexually threatening (85) because they failed to produce

children (87).<sup>3</sup> Eugenics and sexology both intensified the perceived need for the mainstream English community to police women, lesbians, and spinsters most intensely, to ensure what proponents of the theories considered England's racial superiority. Bland also notes that sexology provided some positive messages for the feminist movements in this period, namely by encouraging women to embrace the physicality of sex, but that progressive ideas were reserved specifically for middle- and upper-class, married women, women for whom the theories of sexology did not mean exclusion. The anxieties caused by all of the pressure points described thus far created a steadfast desire to foster breeding among the nation's "ideal" citizenry and simultaneously inhibit homosexuality and other behaviors considered aberrant and thus a threat to the national body politic.

Jane Garrity argues that, within the context of waning imperialism, "ideas of *nation* and *empire* were imbricated in one another precisely through tropes of the female reproductive body," but not just any female body. Garrity carefully points out that the white, middle- and upper- class female body was regarded as the integral factor in preserving perceived racial purity and English integrity (2), and the bodies of those not included in the group were regarded as a direct threat to this English integrity. Women were thus squarely in the middle of several significant cultural and political arguments.

In addition to the multi-faceted conversation about women in this period lies another centerpiece of popular national sentiment and official national propaganda: the notion of rural England as the repository of English values. Raymond Williams contends that the celebration of the English countryside comes from the Victorians who believed in

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<sup>3</sup> The field of eugenics in this period also defined English masculinity in specific ways that served the Empire's best interest, a central component of Bush's scholarship.

“the rural innocence of the pastoral” and established a dichotomy of “here nature, there worldliness” (46). As he explains,

From about 1880 [there was a marked development] of the idea of England as ‘home’, in that special sense in which ‘home’ is a memory and an ideal. Some of the images of this ‘home’ are of central London: the powerful, the prestigious and the consuming capital. But many are of an idea of rural England: its green peace contrasted with the tropical or arid places of actual work; its sense of belonging, of community, idealized by contrast with the tensions of colonial rule and the isolated alien settlement. (281)

Williams draws into tension the disparate entities of the idealized pastoral landscape and the harsh realities of colonial rule, positing that the English pastoral exists only in relation to its colonial counterpart. This symbiotic relationship mirrors the way in which England’s ideal woman emerges only in relation to the colonial Other. The romanticized notions of the country and the English landscape intensified during this tenuous historical period. Debra Rae Cohen argues that, “in its reliance upon the equivocation of England’s ‘green and pleasant land’ as the essence of what the troops were fighting for, wartime rhetoric made reference to a notion of England as an enclosed, inviolate garden that had existed as part of the national mythology since the time of Spencer” (50). The English pastoral became the “touchstone of true national feeling” (Cohen 50) that the British were called upon to defend. Susan Grayzel notes that “Propaganda posters issued by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee showed the men of Britain a pristine, unpopulated countryside and asked them to respond to ‘Your Country’s Call: Isn’t this worth fighting

for?’” (156). The homeland was represented not by the city streets of London or Manchester, but by the fields, hills, and thatched cottages of rural Britain, as Williams notes.

Official nationalism in the early-twentieth century magnified this nostalgia for the English countryside and featured it as what was worth fighting for. Popular national sentiment, as represented in magazines, literature, museum exhibits, etc, figured rural England as the antithesis of war, making the country’s cottages, stone fences, and fields the site of stability, health, and sanctity, the opposite of what was happening on the continent. The intensified focus on the rural, both in the official and sentimental forms of English nationalism, manifested a self-consciousness different from the Victorian celebrations of the countryside, as Williams describes them. There emerged protective, defensive gestures spurred by political tension and colonial discord. Paul Fussell calls the English pastoral the “unbroken earth,” the direct opposite of the trenches, reasoning that since war takes place outdoors and within nature, it represents the “ultimate anti-pastoral,” further noting that “the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral” (231). Imaging the pastoral, for those in the midst of warfare, accomplishes two tasks, according to Fussell: it allows those imaging it a way to contextualize and fully gauge the calamities of war and provides a measure of comfort, like a “wooly vest” (235). Unrest in the colonies, the threat of invasion, and the violence of the war pushed the idea of the English countryside as an inviolate space in which the best of England is made manifest into the foreground of the nation’s imaginary, propaganda, and sentiment.



The countryside's prominence in the English national imagination coincides with the proliferation of images of motherhood in this period and the characterization of England as Britannia (female, mother) that feature prominently in official forms of English nationalism and spring from the same social and political sources as the increased celebration of the pastoral. The figure of the innocent, white, English female discussed earlier thus directly connects with the idealization of the landscape, which makes the female body the site of national longing as well. The war propaganda posters represent perhaps the most conspicuous use of the English woman to represent national and imperial interests. Cohen cites one that depicts a mother looking out the window onto a rural landscape as soldiers march to duty. Inside the home, the model for patriarchal control, the mother dressed in white is flanked by two children who cling to her as she watches with her head held high in a noble, brave posture. The words, "Women of Britain Say – GO!" imply that women of Britain are of singular mind and character and that they have national agency and should use it to support the war by sending their husbands and sons to the front. The image of the woman inside, in her flowing gown, comforting troubled children implies that the women of Britain embody the same nobility and purity as the landscape outside the window, both of which the soldier marches onward to protect. The mother is figured as Britannia and vice versa in order to personify British character and mobilize patriotism for the war effort. Cohen argues that "wartime propaganda exploited images of traditional femininity as well as the traditional nostalgic equation of woman and home, urging women to persuade men to help prevent the violation of England's female space" (5). In short, wartime propaganda capitalized on notions of the nobility, purity, and stoicism of maternity consolidated in part by eugenics

and sexology, drawing an implicit (and sometimes explicit) parallel between Mother England and the mothers of soldiers sent to the front. These connections echo Zillah Eisenstein's argument that women are symbolic mothers of all the nation's children, and they preserve the home in which men construct their "fictive manliness." Thus, according to Eisenstein, women's bodies become the visible manifestation of national values (42-43).

The brutality of the war and its aftermath and the Empire's increasing instability in the years between 1915 and 1927 focused England's attention on seemingly stable, controllable objects and aspects: the English countryside and English women. It is no coincidence that both are used to invoke national sentiment and emblemize a set of national imperial values. Additionally, both are categories that come into being alongside a racialized and devalued Other, which points to the role the British Empire plays in defining English national identity in this period.

### **The Body of Scholarship**

This project brings together scholarship on nationalism, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory to delineate the ways in which women in this period in England experienced the nation. The body of scholarship on nationalism is broad, traverses numerous academic disciplines, and includes discussions of the rise of nationalism, the roots of nationalism, the function of nationalism in the modern age, and many conversations about regional-specific nationalisms. Several scholars have pointed out,

however, that the conversations about how the nation is gendered remain limited. My work will help broaden that dialogue. Sita Ranchod-Nilsson and Mary Ann Tetreault list Benedict Anderson, Liah Greenfield, and Ernest Gellner as examples of theorists who omit gender from their frameworks. They argue that, while such work traces the historical development of national identities effectively, the exclusion of gender in their analyses renders their conclusions “with little to connect to contemporary nationalist movements, most of which appear to be hierarchical, violent, recurrent, and exclusionary rather than egalitarian, evolutionary, persistent, and inclusive” (11). Ranchod-Nilsson and Tetreault seek to broaden established conversations about nationalism and argue that nations necessarily depend upon naturalized gender differences and essentializing assumptions about gender (11). Linda Racioppi and Katherine O’Sullivan also point to the deficiencies in the body of nationalist studies and seek to enlarge them accordingly, saying that previous studies leave the impression that men and women experience national identity similarly and exclude “many questions which are essential for understanding national identity and the dynamics of nationalism” (27, 33). The general sentiment among recent scholars is that the standard texts in nationalist scholarship provide tremendous value and have shaped the present understanding of nationalism but that studies from this point forward need to incorporate the awareness that nations rely on women’s bodies as emblems and as markers of boundaries, that women are the site of cultural debates within the nation, and that real women differ greatly from the static image of women upon which the nation is fabricated. Work that neglects to include these assumptions will, necessarily, be flawed.

Feminist approaches to the nation have been limited, as well, in two particular ways: they have tended to be ethno-centric and they have elided conversations about masculinity and its role in the nation alongside its counterpart, femininity. My project will seek to address some of these gaps and simultaneously discuss the importance of race to nation, building upon Zillah Eisenstein's assertion that nation-building depends upon both gendered and racialized images of women's bodies.<sup>4</sup> Scholarship on gender, until recently, developed along separate and independent lines, according to Sinha (182), who credits Frantz Fanon with being one of the first to study gender in the context of nationalism. Before Said, argues Sinha, feminist scholarship neglected the nation and nationalism (182), as studies of the nation and nationalism neglected gender.

Critics have increasingly recognized that gender and race are constructed simultaneously and that conversations about English women should recognize that Englishness depends upon a collection of "racial" characteristics that emerge through national rhetoric. This marks the point where postcolonial studies merge with feminism. Anne McClintock and Robin Hackett have explored the intimate connection between race and gender (and class). I build upon their premise that cultured English women can only exist as a category of identity when set against colonial subjects who serve as a reference point. Sinha argues that the integration of an imperial framework into the study of nation and gender has several important implications. The most important of these implications for this project is the need to clear the way for "emerging ideas about national and gender difference in the imperial metropole" that were "elaborated and tested in a variety of

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<sup>4</sup> In her article "Writing Bodies on the Nation for the Globe," Zillah Eisenstein argues that "The fantasized bodies of a homogenized 'womanhood' – maybe a maternalized Barbie doll – are used to mark 'the' western nation. Nation-building is already, then, encoded with a series of racialized/sexualized/engendered silences. The symbolized woman, as mother of us all, physically attaches the nation to family and nature with their racialized meanings" (35).

colonial sites” (183). Feminist critics have come to understand that gender, race, and class intersect with the nation and are determined by each other, but critics such as McClintock and Wachman argue that empire has informed each as well. One must consider English women in terms of the Empire, as they experience their lives at home and not just abroad. Levine summarizes this very premise:

[S]tudies of gender issues cannot be relegated to a sub-branch, a supplement, of historical inquiry [of Empire]. They are not ‘additions’ or secondary knowledge subordinate to some more important set of considerations. Rather these are questions and issues which are central to any historical inquiry because they deal with issues and contests and influences that are always at stake, always also challenged, and always present. (11)

In sum, as McClintock argues, “imperialism cannot be fully understood without a theory of gender power” (6).

*The Voyage Out, The Return of the Soldier, Lolly Willowses, and Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* were written by white, middle-class, English women in the shadow of World War I, either during the war or in the decade following, when the British Empire reached its apex and began to show signs of its immanent decline. Critics have focused on the texts’ formalism and feminism, but few critics have examined their treatment of gender, race, and class vis-à-vis postcolonial and national scholarship. When viewed through a lens that brings to bear the dialogues of feminism, nationalism, and postcolonial studies, these texts that appear to ignore race and Empire reveal how the varied categories of

identity emerge within the imperial nation. The confluence of race and gender thus becomes central to the texts and an understanding of them.

### **The Chapters**

The novels addressed in this project provide a space for exploring how these critical conversations about the intersections of nation, empire, and gender can be brought together to tease out new observations about women's lives in England between 1915 and 1927. My selection of novels chronicle and question what it means to be a middle-class, white woman in the early-twentieth-century English imperial nation. They also explore how the nation constructs its identity through women's bodies and yet limits possibilities for them to identify with the nation. Central to this project are the ways in which these women authors depict the position of English middle-class women at a point in history when change was imminent and tradition rigidly reinforced.

I take as my central tenet the need to amplify and magnify the theme of imperialism and gender. As Hackett and Wachman assert, "imperial discourse is as significant in work that is overtly about empire as in work that is not overtly about empire" (20). Said similarly argues that critical analyses of literature should consider more fully the dynamics between the center and the periphery. Buried in the subtexts I examine are deep connections to the Empire, whether economic, political, or cultural. The marginal presence of colonial Others also operates in key ways in each novel; as Michelle Cliff argues, "Dark people are the subtext of empire" (96), and the texts studied

in this dissertation demonstrate how the colonial Other mediates ideas of Englishness and English gender roles in particular.

Each text also relies upon embedded references to the colonies against which they define English culture and the novels' characters. The pages of *Lolly Willowes*, for example, are peppered with references to the colonies that help the narrator illuminate the culture in which the novel's protagonist Laura lives, economically and socially, and thus the narrator implicates the Empire along with the English nation in pushing Laura into conformity with hegemonic norms. Similarly, *The Voyage Out* relies on colonial landscape and the implied presence of native residents to frame the narrative and provide the backdrop against which the travelling English community defines itself and interprets the action that unfolds among them. *The Return of the Soldier* demonstrates how the colonial relationship between the white colonizer and the Other depends on primitive discourse and reveals how the English class system inscribes imperial categories of racial difference.

Each novel, with the exception of *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, tracks the life of a middle-class, single, childless, white, English woman. Each woman's life connects to the imperial nation in subtle but crucial ways, ways that leave her isolated from her community because her wish for greater autonomy and individualism can find no outlet in the contemporary culture. All three novels gesture toward possible alternative lifestyles, but only Warner's character finds a viable means to extract herself from societal expectations and live outside the categories of identity doled out to women of her race and class in this cultural context.

Woolf, West, and Warner focus on domesticity and its normally invisible imperial underpinnings. As one of the primary sites of female indoctrination into the nation, the domestic features prominently in each text. Each author depicts the hidden connections between the domestic realm and the Empire, making claims that the gender roles performed in middle-class English homes are both informed by the imperial nation and support it in turn. Middle-class English women support the imperial economy through consumption of goods and resources, for example, while the presence of the colonial Other in distant territories mediates notions of English womanhood. An intense focus on the English pastoral tradition also figures prominently in each text. The site of poignant national nostalgia, the rural English landscape functions in early twentieth-century national rhetoric as the symbol of the country's values, in ways that mimic the middle-class English woman's symbolic function. Each text challenges these prevailing notions, seeking alternative ways for women to identify with the pastoral in addition to finding new ways to identify themselves.

This dissertation will also examine the changing institutions of marriage and sexuality. Each text dramatizes its heroine's feelings toward marriage and sexuality, the gauntlet that the main characters must navigate. The spinster in this particular period in England was a significant site of national anxiety, and her position in her culture is particularly complex in relation to the national feminine ideal and the national agenda. By focusing on an unmarried woman, each author foregrounds issues of marriage and sexuality as they relate to England's political agenda, and what it means to be unmarried in a culture that privileges the white, middle-class, female body for its procreative capacity. Similarly, England's lower classes haunt the margins of each text, also



illustrating how the middle-class white woman is positioned in terms of class structure. Woolf, West, and Warner reveal that the groups of people typically relegated to the periphery inform the center in meaningful ways, providing a backdrop of Otherness against which the dominant group defines itself. Since the English nation ultimately depends upon heterosexual unions, marriage serves as a foundational national institution and women and men in the novels face multiple pressures that push them into socially-acceptable unions. The narratives depict English women who resist marriage and, by doing so, push contemporary issues of marriage and spinsterhood into the foreground. Each author underscores the nature and variety of the social imperatives toward sanctioned heterosexual unions, and they each indicate that lesbian relationships and their subversive possibilities stand as one potential alternative. Through resistance to heterosexual normativity, each author formulates an anti-imperial, anti-national critical strategy.

The novels as a group also express discomfort with assumptions that the national experience is uniform, singular, and shared, and they expose ways in which women's experiences, when articulated, threaten to undermine national stability. Furthermore, these texts exhibit an understanding that the British nation is distinctly gendered and they explore how women participate in subject formation within the nation and, conversely, how they are formed as subjects, demonstrating both complicity (sometimes unwitting) and servitude. In addition to domesticity, marriage, and sexuality, all of the novels in this project share a common concern with landscape, primitivism, the English class system, and the Empire as they are made manifest in England during this period. These authors examine these multiple sites of inquiry through the lives of their heroines and reveal how

even minute details of daily life in England are informed and mediated through national imperialism and imperial rhetoric.

I have divided my project into three chronological chapters, one on each novelist, and a conclusion. My first chapter focuses on Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), which explores the social development of the young, single, middle-class Rachel Vinrace who is introduced to English culture on her journey to South America. What is significant about the way Woolf charts Rachel's indoctrination into the imperial nation is how she incorporates details of English nationalism into the narrative, linking Rachel's cultural indoctrination with markers of national imperial identity. Woolf connects Englishness and women's gender roles with English imperial history, English literature, landscape, marriage, and sexuality in particular. Marriage features prominently in the novel as a central institution through which nearly every character defines him or herself. Rachel, with little experience with her own English culture, serves as a blank template for the narrator to demonstrate the intersections of these various institutions and their role in subject formation, and Woolf delineates the role the Empire plays in formulating these institutions themselves. Rachel, unable to find herself reflected in any of the markers of national identity, searches for a life unaffiliated with the imperial nation.

My second chapter features Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), which articulates the role women play in upholding national institutions, the imperial economy, and the axiomatics of imperialism at home. This chapter analyses West's ambivalent critique of the pastoral, the Empire, women's gender roles, and spinsterhood in wartime, specifically, as it is the only text that situates World War I as the central event. West emphasizes the importance of sanctioned, normal behavior among English

citizens during the war, demonstrating how the nation relies on women's traditional gender roles to uphold the status quo and maintain national stability in a time of crisis. Jenny, the spinster narrator, demonstrates how racism operates in the metropole, creating boundaries between the center of power and that which lies outside of it. Jenny reproduces imperial primitivism in her treatment of Margaret but eventually learns to see that Margaret has value as a human, not just for her capacity for labor, which causes Jenny to reject aspects of her imperial culture. What is most notable about West's depiction of primitivism is how deeply-rooted it is and how thoroughly it characterizes relationships among English people, a fact made plain by Jenny's ambiguous feelings toward Margaret, which she can never resolve. While Jenny expresses disdain for the manifestations of the imperial nation in the manor house, she endorses them in the end, privileging normalcy over individualism, thus returning Chris, the male head of household, to the warfront.

My third and final chapter focuses on two texts by Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes* (1926) and *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* (1927). Both of these texts disrupt the traditional association of the English landscape with Englishness by associating landscape instead with individual autonomy. *Lolly Willowes* traces the life of an unmarried woman, Laura, who objects to domesticity and the traditional roles thrust upon her and, once she reaches middle age, manages to cast off her burdens and live according to her own wishes, firmly outside of the imperial nation's expectations. Warner carefully depicts Laura's life leading up to her rupture with the conventional as hemmed in by elements of the nation including marriage, language, the Empire, and history, and demonstrates the power of the imperial nation in pushing its women into conformity in

order to meet its needs. Once alone and liberated, Laura forms a new life in the English countryside and reinvents herself through a sexualized/homosexualized relationship with the landscape that disrupts its traditional associations with Englishness.

While *Lolly Willowes* critiques the English imperial nation and its trappings, *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* critiques its protagonist, Timothy Fortune, a lone nation-builder abroad (a missionary on a South Seas island) who attempts to form a relationship among the natives. Fortune functions in similar ways as the English nation from which he hails when he attempts to impose his idea of order on the natives via language, religion, and marriage. His attempts fail and his desires to reform give way to his homosexual desires for the young islander named Lueli. Like the landscape in *Lolly Willowes*, the tropical island becomes complicit with the implied homosexual relationship between Fortune and the boy, which disassociates it from traditional notions of Englishness.

This dissertation discusses imperial nationalism and its thematization in modernist women's texts that remain deeply relevant for a multi-racial, postcolonial world. These writers weigh the price of invocations of national unity that necessarily set up a divisive 'us vs. them' dichotomy. They also investigate nationalism as it sets up and relies upon a gender dichotomy as well, permeating the lives of women who live within (materially) and serve as (rhetorically and politically) the nation's boundaries. By marrying conversations about race and gender in the context of nationalism and imperialism, my project will contribute to the growing body of post-colonial feminist criticism that pushes for a greater understanding of how the intersections of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and nation form identities of individuals across the globe and determine material factors in women's lives. The characters in the novels I discuss represent women in England in this

particular period, whose lives are affected by nationalism and imperialism and their multiple and often hidden effects. These novels provide a glimpse of a view from below, and examining them through the framework I have assembled here provides new and useful insight into their narrative strategies to expose the details of women's lives as experienced in the imperial nation.

# Chapter One

## Englishness, Empire, and Rachel Vinrace's Search for Autonomy in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*

### INTRODUCTION

*Unfortunately, one only remembers what is exceptional. And there seems to be no reason why one thing is exceptional and another not. Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember? Why remember the hum of bees in the garden going down the beach, and forget completely being thrown naked by father into the sea?*

--Virginia Woolf<sup>5</sup>

Woolf scholarship, which focuses on both her fiction and her non-fiction, is vast and, seemingly, covers nearly every critical angle possible. One of Woolf's novels, however, has not garnered much critical attention at all by comparison, and that is her debut novel, *The Voyage Out*, which many dismiss as a beautiful but somewhat fumbling text with mistakes that belie her inexperience. Many critics complain that the novel does not cohere, but they have not discerned the central element that binds the novel together:

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<sup>5</sup> From "A Sketch of the Past," 11

the vast underlying presence of the British Empire. While the Empire itself appears only as a shadowy presence of which the characters in the novel rarely seem aware, it directly informs the versions of English nationalism that define each character and drive his or her actions. The novel, this chapter will argue, is about one young woman's indoctrination into the English nation and the imperial project and her search for an alternate way to affiliate with those institutions.

In *The Voyage Out*, published in 1915, Woolf uses several narrative strategies to explore the ways in which the nation and the Empire define gender roles in the early part of the twentieth century and to challenge the role middle-class women play in the life of the modern English nation and the Empire, which at that time was largely as wives and mothers. Woolf's sharp focus on how the British Empire and expectations of women inform the institution of marriage in England, the text's central argument, makes the text unique in its treatment of imperialism. Many critics have characterized the novel as a bildungsroman that traces the heroine's courtship and engagement, but this chapter will argue that the novel instead tracks Rachel Vinrace's courtship and engagement with the Empire and her final refusal to commit herself to it. Unable to envision an alternative way to affiliate herself with the English nation, she succumbs to death.

In the novel, Woolf transplants an English community to San Marina, a tiny village in South America, and follows it through the course of a season, focusing on Rachel's initiation into English society under the tutelage of several older women. Woolf defamiliarizes elements of English culture by setting the text abroad, thus facilitating an exploration of the roles that place, tradition, history, landscape, and race play in congealing and promoting the sense of national identity that informs the institution of

marriage in the text. The South American backdrop highlights the characters' "Englishness" as they understand it and spurs conversations among the English about their values, goals, identities, and relationships. Similarly, brief encounters with the South American natives allow Woolf to depict the imperial construction of race and reveal how it informs English constructions of gender and sexuality. Marriage features prominently in the novel as a central institution through which nearly every character defines him or herself. Rachel, who has had meager exposure to the world outside her father's ship, serves as a blank template on which Woolf projects the connections between nationalism, empire, marriage, and sexuality as they relate to English women. Because she has no mother or other female role models who take charge of her education, intellectually and socially, Rachel lacks the common knowledge and experience that most girls her age have and, as a result, she feels that the expectations pushed upon her are alien.

Woolf's focus on marriage, the nation, and the Empire reflects the historical context in which she wrote *The Voyage Out*, which she began in 1908<sup>6</sup> and spent nine years writing and revising.<sup>7</sup> Those years witnessed a rapidly changing England in terms of culture, economics, and politics, and they brought about the First World War. That turbulence appears subtly in the novel, embedded in the characters' sense of themselves and their position within the nation. This chapter contends that the contemporary conversations about eugenics, sexology, and the feminist movements, combined with escalating fears about England's vulnerability to attack and upheavals in the colonies are woven tightly into the text. The action in the novel takes place overseas among a group of

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<sup>6</sup> I am using Jessica Tvardi's reference to 1908 as the start date for *The Voyage Out*, although other sources claim the year was 1909 or 1910.

<sup>7</sup> The early drafts of the novel were titled *Melymbrosia* and while many critics incorporate details from this text into their work, I will only engage with the final printed version in this chapter as this is the version that Woolf intended to be seen.



people largely uninterested in lower class or feminist activity, and seemingly oblivious of England's precarious position as a world power, but the novel nevertheless focuses on how changing ideas of Englishness and the Empire influence the characters materially and psychologically.

Using tenets established by post-colonial feminist critics like Anne McClintock, Zillah Eisenstein, Jane Garrity, and Mrinalini Sinha as a jumping off point, I will investigate how the categories of gender and race (and class, at times) come into being in this period alongside the contemporary national and imperial rhetoric. Eisenstein argues that "The nation constructs gender, sexuality, and their racial meanings through moments of nation-building [. . .]" and thus nations are encoded with "a series of racialized/sexualized/engendered silences" (35). England relies on the presence of the colonial Other to establish a hierarchy of difference that justifies its treatment of colonial natives, of its women at home in the nation, and of its lower classes. The relationship between these sets of difference is complex, and Sinha notes that gender, for example, "is constituted by other forms of difference such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, as well as colonizer and colonized" (184). The English ideal of womanhood as chaste and pure can only exist alongside the image of the dark and impure native. McClintock argues that the racial deviance that characterizes the colonial Other and provides the medium through which gender is constructed in England, is also used to police the lower classes and groups considered deviant, such as feminists, Jews, and homosexuals, in England beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century (43). In this context, English women emerge as a particularly complex category because of their ambiguous relationship to the Empire: they occupy a privileged position by virtue of their race, but

they are simultaneously subservient in the patriarchal English culture because of their gender. Rachel Vinrace and the other women in the text embody this contradiction.

Similarly, postcolonial feminist theory also seeks to examine what happens to males who face expectations to live according to rigid codes of masculinity that serve to maintain the Empire, something which Woolf examines in the text.

This chapter focuses on how the British Empire permeates all facets of English national culture and therefore affects middle- and upper-class English citizens (the class strata presented in the text) in multiple ways. Rachel's response to the South American natives reveals women's precarious position in the imperial project. They participate in colonial Othering, yet that process subjugates them at home and relies on the female body in restrictive ways. The Empire, in short, mediates ideas of Englishness and womanhood, leaving English women with very specific roles to play and very few (if any) alternate ways to affiliate. Thus, while native South Americans make only a token appearance in the text, they play an essential role in the action because they, and other "dark" people across the globe in the colonial territories, provide the backdrop against which the English define themselves

Woolf criticism has only recently begun to focus on the politics in *The Voyage Out*, and this chapter will contribute to the work that sees this first novel as a critical piece to the rest of Woolf's texts that engage with the Empire and issues of Englishness. Critics such as Jane Marcus have been instrumental in opening up discussions that pivot on Woolf's cultural context, feminism, and empire, but, as Patricia Juliana Smith notes, *The Voyage Out* "has long stood as a problematic text to her critics." This chapter will

situate it as a precursor to the texts that engage with empire to much more critical acclaim.

A brief critical history reveals how long it has taken critics to appreciate *The Voyage Out*, much less engage with its key issues. When first released, the novel received some positive attention for its unique sense of style and its innovative focus on modes of consciousness, but critics mostly lodged complaints about the novel's apparent weaknesses that some identified as a lack of continuity, incoherencies in plot, and incomplete or defective character development. Contemporary reviews pointed to the novel's "failure of design" and critics called it bewildering," "clumsy," and "disconnected" (qtd in Kuehn 126). Toward the latter half of the century when literary scholars began to develop the conversations about Woolf's body of work and its importance to modernist literature, *The Voyage Out* began to receive more positive attention than it had, but this body of criticism largely focuses on biographical elements, linking Virginia Woolf's personal experiences with people and events in the text.

In 1981, responding to these superficial readings of Woolf's work as a whole, Jane Marcus posed an important question: "Why, we women critics ask, has so little attention been paid to the social criticism, the sexual politics, of Woolf's novels? Have the critics' eyes been so riveted on the 'feminine sentence' that their ears have not heard what it says?" (*New Feminist Essays* xiv-xv). In the years following, critics began to engage with social and political issues in *The Voyage Out* and, more recently, critics have begun to discuss the novel's imperialistic undertones. The critics who discuss empire examine the treatment of the natives that appear in the margins but not how the English citizens are themselves affected by the imperial structure. For example, in his

introduction to The Modern Library edition of the text, Michael Cunningham notes that, if Woolf “were much concerned with questions of empire and subjugation while she wrote the book, she didn’t noticeably address herself to the reactions of those most affected” (xxxiii). I argue that Woolf does address those most (or at least those equally) affected by empire: she addresses those who live within the imperial nation, those whose experiences are mediated by the categories of identity like gender, race, and class that emerge from the imperial experience.

### ***THE VOYAGE OUT***

*I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream*

--Virginia Woolf<sup>8</sup>

*The Voyage Out* is a simple novel, in many ways. A cast of characters spends a season abroad. They get to know one another, two engagements are made, and the heroine dies of fever in the end. The plot does not twist and it barely turns, and the central feature, the romance between Rachel and Terence, is lackluster even in its most heated moments. Yet the novel presents a complex view of the English nation, the British

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<sup>8</sup> From *Moments of Being*

Empire, and English culture as practiced by the group of travelers. In conversations among the characters, about both mundane details and grand ideas, and with the guidance of a keen-eyed omniscient narrator, the scaffolding of these leviathan social structures becomes visible. Woolf also exposes the scaffolding by setting the novel overseas, where English culture stands out more distinctly in comparison to that of the South American village. This chapter will first discuss Englishness, then nationalism in its various forms in the novel, then Woolf's treatment of imperialism, concluding with how their confluence affects Rachel as woman.

### **So Very English**

One of the underlying questions the novel poses is 'what is Englishness?' and how does it permeate the lives of British citizens? Woolf depicts Englishness as a constellation of values that serve the interests of the Empire, values that guide every character in the text. Characters often invoke Englishness as a means of justifying behavior, sometimes as a means of creating community amongst themselves, and sometimes as a way to indicate moral or cultural superiority compared to other groups. In the novel, to be English means being militarily superior, middle- or upper-class, free, and chaste. In South America, Englishness remains intact; in fact, the characters' encounters with 'the other' strengthen their sense of Englishness. By the novel's end, Woolf has demonstrated that Englishness is marked by rigid class difference, it is heavily inflected

by gender difference, it relies on the Other for consolidation, and, finally, that the rallying points of Englishness are mutable constructions of popular sentiment and not innate characteristics of the population, an idea not yet specifically addressed in critical work.

One of the first indications that being English means being militarily superior compared to other ‘races’ comes from Clarissa Dalloway, wife of a gentleman who was once a member of Parliament. With an air of money and status about them, the Dalloways cause a stir when they board the ship in Portugal, a good deal into the ship’s journey. Alone with her husband, Richard, she says to him:

Being on this ship seems to make it so much more vivid—what it means to be English. One thinks of all we’ve done, and our navies, and the people in India and Africa, and how we’ve gone on century after century, sending out our boys from little country villages—and of men like you, Dick, and it makes one feel as if one couldn’t bear *not* to be English! (47-8)

Clarissa portrays England as a summation of its military and political accomplishments, represented by men like her husband. Clarissa says she could not bear not to be English, and reiterates the sentiment when she spots war ships on the horizon. She spies two “sinister grey vessels, low in the water, and bald as bone” and exclaims, “Aren’t you glad to be English!” (66). In both of these instances, Clarissa equates Englishness with England’s past military conquests and current military might, all masculine accomplishments. Clarissa wholeheartedly affiliates herself with this masculine version of Englishness.

Expanding on this conservative, gendered version of Englishness, Richard Dalloway also equates Englishness with a continuity of political strength and military

prowess. In response to Clarissa's comment about "what it means to be English," he says, "It's the continuity," and the narrator observes that "A vision of English history, King following King, Prime Minister Prime Minister, and Law Law had come over him while his wife spoke" (48). The focus on the continuity of the English political system, another entirely masculine sphere, points to the contemporary anxiety about England losing its stronghold on the globe as Germany began to outpace them in both economics and military heft. With the possibility of war looming on the heels of the embarrassment of the Boer War, which exposed England's weakness, the insistence on England's traditional greatness mirrors the official and unofficial propaganda in circulation at the time. The Dalloways express the popular belief—or need to believe—that England's military and political muscle and its long history reigning as one of the globe's supreme powers was the unshakable pillar upon which all English people stood and would continue to stand for the foreseeable future.

The Dalloways convey glorified notions of English military aggression that pay no apparent regard to the bodies of men that are sacrificed in order to uphold the traditions they and the other characters on the voyage celebrate. Their patriotism is detached and idealistic and the narrator, by calling the ships "sinister," gestures to the ugly subtext that lurks beneath the Dalloways' version of Englishness. Julia Briggs observes that Woolf had a great deal of disdain for propaganda before the war that capitalized on manipulated versions of Englishness to promote military interests: "Woolf particularly disliked the kinds of sentiment about England and Englishness licensed by army recruitment campaigns [. . .]" (105). One enlistment poster, for instance, depicted a smiling soldier with his rifle in the foreground who points to a thatched-roofed cottage

amid rolling hills and country lane (reprinted in Cohen, 77). Clarissa Dalloway's sentiment about the ships echoes the sentiments in this poster and other efforts of military recruitment campaigns by connecting military activity to an essential "Englishness" that the citizens must defend.

The equation of Englishness with notions of freedom connects to the idea of Englishness as military supremacy. Shortly after boarding the ship, Clarissa tells the other travelers that she photographed Fielding's grave and set a caged bird free because "one hates to think of anything in a cage where English people lie buried" (36). Clarissa's notions of freedom, which she directly links to Englishness, are child-like – she frees a bird in an overly-sentimental display of her version of patriotism. Similarly, Richard Dalloway exposes the limitations of this middle- and upper-class version of Englishness with regard to the notion of freedom when he speaks alone with Rachel. She asks what his political aim is and he responds, "Unity. Unity of aim, of dominion, of progress. The dispersion of the greatest ideas over the greatest area." Rachel asks if by that he means "the English." He responds, "I grant that the English seem, on the whole, whiter than most men, their records cleaner," but clarifies that he sees the drawbacks in contemporary English life, namely poor working conditions for the lower classes. Richard then claims that, thanks to his political work, factory girls in Lancashire can now spend an hour a day "in the open air which their mothers had to spend over their looms" (62). Just as Clarissa thinks freeing a caged bird symbolizes English freedom, Richard thinks that an hour a day in open air ameliorates poor factory conditions for the lower classes. Certainly better wages and a safer, cleaner work environment would benefit these working women more. Both of these statements indicate that the Dalloways' upper-class version of Englishness



is male-centered and that it stands far removed from the facts of English life as the working classes experience them.

The other characters in the novel, all middle- and upper-class, espouse equally class-specific versions of Englishness and share common values of chastity, tradition, and organization in particular, in addition to notions of military supremacy and freedom. In an early scene, the crowd has gathered for dinner and the narrator observes:

The English could not pale the sunshine, but they could in some miraculous way slow down the hours, dull the incidents, lengthen the meals, and make even the servants and page-boys wear a look of boredom and propriety. (234)

By describing the group of travelers specifically as “English” in this passage, the narrator effectively reveals their behavior and habits as their performance of Englishness, which is a leisurely-paced day in which meals are long and formal and the hours stretch by in measured pace, all defined by restraint and reserve. The starched shirts and petticoats the men and women wear round out the genteel English culture they carefully recreate on foreign soil. They inflict their Englishness on the servants who obviously do not share their values and zest for long and dull days. Similarly, when an older woman named Mrs. Paley wakes at night hungry, she calls her maid to fetch her biscuits and the maid comes to the sound of the bell, “drearily respectful even at this hour though muffled in a mackintosh” (107). The characters’ version of Englishness promotes leisure and formality for themselves and relies upon the lower classes to make it possible, with little regard for how their expectations affect those upon whom they depend, just as Richard

and Clarissa Dalloway disregard soldiers' bodies and the female factory workers' role in sustaining the country militarily and economically.

The travelers' English sense of superiority and decorum runs throughout the novel, and two other characters, St. John and Helen, point out the hypocrisy when Mr. Thornbury ousts a prostitute from the hotel. Helen exclaims, "It's the hypocritical smugness of the English makes my blood boil. A man who's made his fortune in trade as Mr. Thornbury has is bound to be twice as bad as any prostitute" (320). The outward appearance of proper Englishness, Helen indicates, does not always accurately reflect the heart and mind of an Englishman. Since the reader never learns whom the prostitute was visiting (and the hotel visitors are mostly English), the reader must wonder if at least one of the Englishmen in the group engages in unseemly behavior. Woolf, through the use of an ironic narrator and through a small handful of somewhat subversive characters like St. John and Helen, undermines the apparent seamlessness of this specific version of Englishness presented in the text. If the characters are hypocrites, then their presentation of proper Englishness is little more than performance and artifice. Briggs argues that Woolf's responses to Englishness "are among the most provocative, subtle, and acute" (97), and that, "As a cultural critic, Woolf felt herself offended by the attitudes on display, the heroics, smugness and complacency of all kinds that seemed to pour down from the walls (103). Woolf endowed some of her characters with this hypocritical smugness and then undercuts them with statements like those of Helen and St. John who expose Englishness as something fabricated.

Woolf indicates in other ways that Englishness is more of a performance than an innate virtue, which is key to understanding how it operates in the text and how it

includes and excludes specific groups of people based on class and gender. She does this with small but important cues from the narrator. For example, the group on the ship endure a strong and lengthy storm that leaves them addled and seasick. When Richard Dalloway rises and dresses after the storm subsides, the narrator says, "The ordinary world outside slid into his mind, and by the time he was dressed he was an English gentleman again" (71). By saying he was a gentleman "again," the passage indicates that he was not a gentleman when the storm was rocking the vessel, implying that Englishness is transient, something to be donned like his gentlemen's clothing when he readies himself to reenter the stage. The narrator again characterizes Englishness as constructed when she describes the nature of English friendships abroad, saying "[. . .] these alliances seemed cynically fragile, and sometimes painfully acute, lacking as they did the supporting background of organized English life" (229). Once again the organization of English life provides the key to maintaining their Englishness and, whether by storm or relocation, disruptions cause it to falter, again indicating that Englishness is not something innate, something inherent in the 'race' as most of the characters believe; it is a performance that requires the necessary props of English daily life. Additionally, when Terence and Rachel stay out alone together past eight o'clock in the evening, Rachel expresses concern when she realizes the time. Terence responds, "But eight o'clock doesn't count here, does it?" and the narrator reveals that they "felt more intimate because they shared the knowledge of what eight o'clock in Richmond meant" (227). If eight o'clock does not count in South America, then the English customs that serve to protect chastity are equally shallow and mutable.

The placid and organized middle- and upper-class English life allows the characters to enact their version of Englishness, and once the organization is disrupted or dislocated, their Englishness threatens to come apart at the seams. The middle and upper-class version of Englishness displayed by the characters, a system of values that celebrates and promotes English military strength, freedom, order, and chastity, is not something inherent and easy. Rather, Englishness is a class-specific construction that the men and women in the text uphold equally despite the fact that women lack inclusion in certain aspects of Englishness, such as its militarism.

### **Literature and English Imperial Nationalism**

If one defines Englishness as an informal agreement among the country's residents about values and codes of behavior (which vary among groups of citizens according to class), then one can describe nationalism as a more formalized counterpart that reinforces ideas of Englishness but also seeks to solidify political, social, and cultural goals that serve the country's best interests and, ultimately, the Empire's best interests. Steven Grosby argues that nationalisms organize around shared traditions that spring from a distinctive, shared past, a "spatially-situated past" (10). In *The Voyage Out*, nationalism appears firmly rooted in a collective memory that manifests itself in the literature the characters read and discuss, their conversations about English history, and their attitude toward landscape, the spatial component of English nationalism. Most

important to this chapter is that the text also explores how women at the onset of World War I experience this collective memory that undergirds the national identity.

Nationalism requires a singular, shared memory of history, and by the twentieth century, that history was contained in the nation's literature, which Benedict Anderson argues is one of the "bases for national consciousness" (44). Women, however, have experienced that history differently, as Woolf demonstrates, and nationalism relies on women in a very different way from how it relies on men.

Literature is one of the novel's main themes and many of the key conversations in its pages incorporate discussions of and references to texts that the characters have read and/or recommend others to read. Krishan Kumar notes that, "For many people, literature—not Parliament or the monarchy—*was* England, the noblest and most heartfelt expression of the English people" (220). Volumes circulate among the characters as a central part of individual lives, often used as a means of forging alliances between friends and lovers. Literature provides the common ground upon which nearly all of the characters meet and one of the threads that unite them as distinctly English. The text presents a large body of work that represents the collective English national history, one that appropriates Greek and Roman history as its own, too, and consolidates a set of values that most of the characters endorse, a set of values that support British imperialism.

The Dalloways make wide use of literary references, using different authors and texts as validation for their feelings toward and opinions of the English nation. Literature, for example, serves as a marker of patriotism for them. Clarissa Dalloway uses canonical English texts as a way to signal her patriotic belief in her country. Briggs notes that when

Clarissa announces that her favorite play is Shakespeare's *Henry V*, she invokes a key source of patriotic sentiment in England (105). Similarly, Richard Dalloway validates his political accomplishments by comparing them to celebrated English poetry. He boasts to Rachel that he feels proud one of his achievements, prouder "than I should be of writing Keats and Shelley into the bargain" (62). Keats and Shelley, hallmark English poets, act as a marker of Richard Dalloway's satisfaction in his political endeavors. He connects his political work in Parliament with these specific English poets who have come to represent English pride in landscape and essential English character. By affiliating with Keats and Shelley, Richard conflates his accomplishments with the distinctly English values they represent.

Other characters identify with literature in the same way that the Dalloways do. Miss Allan, for example, who is writing a primer of English literature, says she always reads Wordsworth's "Prelude" abroad (104). Similarly, Hirst decides which books to take on the expedition up the river and exclaims, "We shall want some poets, too," and asks to borrow volumes of George Meredith and John Donne from the villa's library (111). By linking their travels in foreign territory with English literature, mostly poetical works that represent the national affiliation with the English countryside, these characters stamp their experiences abroad with their specific national identity. They choose as travel companions poets who extol the virtues of a meaningful connection with the rural landscape of their country, despite the fact that they are travelling somewhere altogether different. In effect, the travelers impose their English versions of landscape on the foreign land. In fact, the characters constantly compare what they see abroad with the English landscape, expressing distaste for all that is not English. For example, when the

group on a picnic survey the landscape, the narrator notes that “Perhaps their English blood made this prospect uncomfortably impersonal and hostile to them” (214). The characters have a means of identifying themselves with the English pastoral as represented in the books they carry with them, but, since they have no means of identifying with the South American landscape, they find it impersonal and thus hostile. The word ‘hostile’ establishes an antagonistic relationship, furthering the claim that the English interact with imperial intent: they subconsciously wish to subdue the native landscape that they perceive as antagonistic. Later, Helen feels “alarmed” by the South American landscape she sees on their journey up the river (289), Rachel admits she finds the blue of the sky and sea “detestable” (314), and Hewett reveals he feels a similar revulsion. The narrator notes that everything Hewett sees outdoors in South America

was distasteful to him. He hated the blue and white, the intensity and definiteness, the hum and heat of the south; the landscape seemed to him as hard and romantic as a cardboard background on the stage, and the mountain but a wooden screen against a sheet painted blue. (251).

He “hates” the foreign landscape and bemoans its lack of romanticism, which is the central feature of the English association with their native countryside. And when Rachel and Terence imagine their life back home in England, they center it around the romanticized notions of the rural English landscape. Terence imagines English meadows and cows, low-slung clouds, and green hills, saying,

Lord, how good it is to think of lanes, muddy lanes, with brambles and nettles, you know, and real grass fields, and farmyards with pigs and cows,

and men walking beside carts with pitchforks—there's nothing to compare with that here. (312)

Even though Rachel and Terence plan to live in the city, when they imagine their life in England, it centers on an idealized image of the pastoral that makes what he and the other characters see in South America seem threatening.

In addition to showcasing English national identity as deeply connected to ideas of English landscape, the literary references in the novel also embody national pride in the British Empire and Woolf uses literature to demonstrate the ethnocentrism inherent in imperial ideology that the literature in the text represents. Many of the novels, histories, plays, and volumes of poetry mentioned in the novel provide a register of imperial activity that memorializes England's past accomplishments and justifies contemporary imperialist behavior. The collection of texts also functions as a central component of imperial practice as enacted in the novel. Julia Kuehn describes the texts that the characters in the novel recommend Rachel read as an "imperialist reading list" (128) imposed upon her, despite the fact that she never solicits recommendations, one should note. When considered in the context of the kind of expansionist imperialism Thomas Macaulay represents, one more fully understands Woolf's political critique of this "reading list" that she weaves through the pages of the novel and her critique of the way the characters use it as an imperial tool.

To begin, one can interpret the body of literature presented in the text as an ethnocentric display of the perceived racial superiority of the English that justifies British imperialism. Near the beginning of the novel, Woolf gestures to Macaulay, the renowned English politician and imperialist who introduced English language instruction in India in



the middle of the nineteenth century via his now infamous *Minute on Indian Education*. In the first chapter, Woolf quotes a small passage from one of Macaulay's poetical works. By invoking him so early, she cements the association with him that colors the novel's subtext throughout. Macaulay represents the widespread belief among English citizens that their culture—represented in its literature—is superior, and the body of literature assembled in the *The Voyage Out* acts one of Empire's most powerful tools used to create cultural hegemony both at home and abroad.

While Woolf never specifically references *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) in *The Voyage Out*, its values are nevertheless present in her characters' world view. It was a well-known treatise among the English and a seminal document that helped define modern British expansionist imperialism, and Macaulay's ideas about English literature are illuminating for a reading of *The Voyage Out*. In *Minute on Indian Education*, Macaulay discusses the "intrinsic superiority of Western literature," arguing that, "I have never found one among [people proficient in the Eastern tongues] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (paragraph 10). He adds:

But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England. (paragraph 11)

Macaulay refuses to recognize any value in Eastern texts, arguing that even the most rudimentary English books stand heads and shoulders above every text in the colonies, signaling what has been and will remain well into the twentieth century a hallmark of modern British imperialism: the devaluation of native cultures and the subsequent installation of an English one, a feat largely achieved through the use of language and literature. Ania Loomba defines literature as an important “contact zone” because it helps to construct imperial authority, both at home and in the colonies (70), arguing that, as a result, literature maintains colonial rule (85). Macaulay sought to use literature as a tool for ruling abroad.

To bolster his argument that the native Indians should learn English and study English texts, Macaulay posits that the English language is “pre-eminent” even among the other Western languages, adding that it is the language of the ruling class and “likely” to become the language of global commerce. Clearly, Macaulay vehemently believes in the primacy of English literature and its use as a tool to indoctrinate colonial natives into the English social order and hegemonize them. Macaulay desired to help create “a body of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (paragraph 34). Woolf showcases a group of English people who believe in the primacy of English texts in the same way as Macaulay and who use them as tools to help ensure that their countrymen and countrywomen are “English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

Macaulay also believes that Greek and Roman literature are ancestors of English literature, arguing that, before the English Renaissance, everything worth reading was contained in the “writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans” (paragraph 15) and that

those texts served as the foundation upon which English literature grew. Marilyn Gaull points out that, during the Romantic period, England began to foster the belief that its culture was a “fulfillment” of ancient Greece and the English “projected their own origins” on the alien culture. Gaull cites Shelley’s introduction to *Hellas*, in which he writes, “We are all Greeks [. . .] our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece” (193). More specifically, Kuehn notes that “Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is a constant point of reference in *The Voyage Out*, and this is no coincidence as Victorian imperialists regularly and proudly modeled themselves after their Roman predecessors” (133). When characters in Woolf’s novel refer to Greek and Roman literature, they essentially embrace it as their own, appropriating, as Gaull indicates, the Greek and Roman history for themselves. This deep connection between Greek and Roman texts and English literature explains the avid interest in and the numerous references to Greek and Roman texts in *The Voyage Out*.

Woolf herself helps to establish the connection between ancient Greek and Roman cultures early in the text. For example, the English ship on which the characters travel is named Euphrosyne after the Greek goddess of grace and beauty. The interior of the vessel is decorated with a framed print of the ancient Roman Colosseum. The narrator notes that the image of the Colosseum is juxtaposed with a print of an English queen, both faded to the same pale shade of yellow, noting that “The Coliseum was scarcely to be distinguished from Queen Alexandra playing with her spaniels” (13). Here Woolf symbolizes the assumed connection between ancient Rome and modern England, substantiating the claim that English appropriates these celebrated ancient cultures. Also early in the novel, Mr. Pepper, an elderly scholar on the ship, connects England directly

with the Greeks and Romans when he says to Rachel that the English system of road-building was inherited from the Romans who inherited their systems from the Greeks (21). Similarly, Ridley Ambrose spends his time in South America translating Pindar for a new volume he intends to publish. Clearly, Woolf's text spotlights the tradition that associates ancient Greek and Roman texts with Englishness.

The other characters in the novel encourage Rachel to study Greek literature as part of her indoctrination into English culture, indicating that literature serves as a primary method of indoctrination for English citizens, just as Macaulay indicates it should be used to indoctrinate people of other cultures. For example, when Terence discovers Rachel's limited exposure to the canon, he says to her, "D'you mean to tell me you've reached the age of twenty-four without reading Gibbon?" (156). Terence loans Rachel a copy of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* but, to his great distress, she finds no interest in it, telling him, "No, I don't like it" when queried (204). The other women in the text have read and admire Gibbon greatly, and Mrs. Thornbury, for example, fully endorses reading *The Decline and Fall* and recalls reading it as a seminal event for her, saying those were some of the "happiest hours of her life" (203). The Greek, Roman, and English bodies of work represent the English value system, one that champions England's imperial history and is used to indoctrinate English citizens, men and women. The canon serves as a means of creating community (many discussions rely heavily on references to literature), and, if one does not know the texts that serve as short-hand for Englishness, one stands outside of the culture, as Rachel does in many ways.

How do the women in the novel engage with these notions of English literature?

The English use of literature also has a class element and one should note that the version of Englishness represented by the canon is largely reserved for the literate, those with leisure time to read, and those with access to libraries, namely the middle and upper classes. The libraries (by and large private collections in homes in this period), Briggs notes, serve English gentlemen and only sometimes women, a fact Woolf points out in an unpublished essay called “Reading” (Briggs 102). Women in the middle and upper classes experience literature differently than men, as Woolf demonstrates in the text. The narrator notes that during one particular stretch of time in the characters’ stay in South America, “[. . .] three odes of Pindar were mended, Helen covered about five inches of her embroidery, and St. John completed the first two acts of a play” (233). The men contribute to the body of English literature by writing and translating, but Helen works at her embroidery, a decorative art that has no commercial value and will not circulate in English culture the way the men’s work will. Women in the middle and upper classes in the text have access to literature and are expected to be versed in it, but the opportunities such access affords them differs from that of men. For example, Miss Allan earns an income through literature in the same way that the male characters do. Unmarried, Miss Allan, who reads Wordsworth abroad, engages with literature to support herself and her brother who has no income of his own. With no husband to support her, Miss Allan uses her mastery of English texts to produce a text of her own in exchange for money. She embraces the male-centered canon to secure financial stability. She tells Rachel that she likes the title of her book, *Beowulf to Browning*, and considers it “the kind of title which might catch one’s eye on a railway bookstall” (328). Her writing will never see the kind

of profit that the men's will see, however. Mr. Hughling, an Oxford Don, and Mr. Pepper and Mr. Ambrose are both published more widely and their texts are probably not for sale in a railway bookstall, a sub-par market. Deborah Hunn argues that "Miss Allan casts an ironic shadow upon the privileges of Terence and the other male intellectuals in the text," and she notes Mr. Ridley in particular, who spends most of the story hidden in his study working on Pindar, "protected from other concerns by his wife Helen" (54). Miss Allan engages in the literary profession, but in a subordinated way because of her gender, with no wife of her own to buffer her from other "concerns." Her profits will not equal those of her male counterparts, nor will her position in the field earn her the respect it does for the men in the text. So, while women like Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Thornbury, and Miss Allan affiliate themselves with the male-centered canon, it excludes them in many ways by virtue of their gender.

While the novel's women embrace the masculine, militaristic display of Englishness and affiliate with male literature and the masculine pursuits they chronicle, Rachel expresses discontent at not finding anything about herself or her life reflected in the texts she reads. Rachel is outside of national indoctrination, as demonstrated from the alienation she feels in regard to the literature she has read and her lack of desire to read the texts others recommend to her. Her lack of interest in national texts first reveals itself in a conversation with Richard Dalloway, when he aligns his political accomplishments with Keats and Shelley. Rachel does not want to identify with literature in the same way, and the narrator notes that "It became painful to Rachel to be one of those who write Keats and Shelley into the bargain" (62). Similarly, she does not identify with romance as the canon depicts it; *Wuthering Heights*, for example, showed her nothing like what she

feels for Terence: “None of the texts she read [. . .] suggested from their analysis of love that what their heroines felt was what she was feeling now. It seemed to her that her sensations had no name” (233). When Terence reads Milton aloud to Rachel, she can only tolerate it because the lyrical tone appeals to her ear and dulls the effect the words have on her. The narrator says, “one could merely listen to his words; one could almost handle them” (338). Rachel feels a gap between language and her experience of the world. When reading her congratulatory letters from others, she crumples them up, thinking “It was strange, considering how very different these people were, that they used almost the same sentences when they wrote to congratulate her” (306). While the people are essentially different, they use the same language, which, according to Rachel, obscures their differences and creates a distasteful homogeneity among them. Similarly, when Rachel sits to write, she “was amazed at the gulf which lay between all that [she sees around her] and her sheet of paper” (308). Rachel recognizes the disconnection between what the written word presents to her and her experience in the world.

As shown, English literature in *The Voyage Out* appropriates Greek and Roman culture as a means of adding historical depth to English history and as a means of justifying perceived notions of ‘racial’ superiority upon which imperialist attitudes such as Macaulay’s rely. The resulting canon as presented in the text serves as the avenue the dominant group of English citizens uses to affiliate themselves with national imperial interests. The characters in the novel carry their books with them on imperial voyages and those texts tacitly justify the English presence in foreign lands and the imperial attitudes the English display in their interaction with the South American natives and the foreign landscape. Rachel, however, acts as Woolf’s spotlight, showing how English

literature fails to adequately reflect the lives of English women, despite the fact that they endorse what they read.

### **English Imperial History**

In the novel, English literature and sanctioned versions of English history, another central aspect of English nationalism, merge through the repeated references to Gibbon's volumes of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. By using Gibbon in this way, Woolf characterizes empire as a style of living, an historical milestone, and a touchstone of greatness for the English characters who read and admire the celebrated historian. Through these repeated references, perhaps Woolf gestures to the contemporary English anxiety over the potential collapse of the British Empire that was beginning to show itself as vulnerable—Rome fell, after all. Beyond that, Woolf uses English history as the model of behavior that the characters emulate in their interactions with the South American natives and the landscape. The characters' actions abroad have strong imperial undertones. Additionally, Woolf makes allusions throughout the novel to imperial activity, specifically characterized as male, that help to classify characters' behavior as imperial in nature. The Empire provides identity for England and a model for individual behavior and attitudes, especially when the English interact with non-English people and alien landscapes. While cataloging the ways in which the characters affiliate with



imperialism, Woolf also demonstrates the ways in which women connect with imperial activity, often supporting it in the same ways that the men do, again except for Rachel.

Woolf establishes British imperial history as foundational in the text by describing South America's historical treatment by the English. The novel takes place against a backdrop of an imperial history of conquest and violence, and the first descriptions of Santa Marina catalogue past imperial violence. The Euphrosyne docks, the reader learns, where "Elizabethan barques had anchored," waiting to haul away "bars of silver, bales of linen, timbers of cedar wood, golden crucifixes knobbed with emeralds" (89). The narrator recounts the arrival of Elizabethan Englishmen on the foreign shores, describing the voyagers as having "fangs greedy for flesh, and fingers itching for gold," and noting that "Here a settlement was made; women were imported; children grew. All seemed to favour the expansion of the British Empire" (89). The characters in the novel are present in South America because their ancestors blazed the trail, and they behave abroad with the same imperial intent the Elizabethans had.

Instances of imperial behavior abound in the novel. Willoughby, who "builds an empire," as the narrator puts it, recounts his experiences with the South American natives whom he has hired. He writes to Helen a letter describing his "triumphs over wretched little natives who went on strike and refused to load his ships, until he roared English oaths at them," causing them to scatter (200). By roaring "English" oaths at the natives, Willoughby literally uses the language as a weapon to control the natives. Also, by using them as the labor that extracts the South American natural resources, Willoughby emulates exploitative imperial behavior and replicates Elizabethan imperialist activity as described earlier. Willoughby has made his own business empire by hauling home South

American rubber, thus capitalizing on native goods and resources. In a similar vein, the Flushings buy decorative items, such as shawls, cloaks, broaches, and earrings, from the locals and sell them to their peers at a handsome profit. Mrs. Flushing says to Rachel, “My husband rides about and finds ‘em; they don’t know what they’re worth, so we get ‘em cheap. And we shall sell ‘em to smart women in London,” and she chuckles as she says this, pleased with her plan (244). Woolf indicts Willoughby and the Flushings as complicit with the imperial mindset.

Furthermore, the two trips in the novel, the picnic and the journey up the river, act as imperial ventures. The narrator notes that “Since the time of Elizabeth very few people had seen the river, and nothing had been done to change its appearance from what it was to the eyes of the Elizabethan voyagers” (275). The characters in the novel participate in a long history of imperial exploration, and much like the river, the English imperial attitude remains unchanged. While on the picnic, Mr. Flushing tells Rachel that “wonderful treasures lay hid in the depths of the land,” signaling his imperial mindset that endorses the appropriation of native goods and resources (246). The characters express similar reverence to the English imperialist past and its goals while on the larger expedition up the river. Along their journey, they pass the hut formerly inhabited by an early English explorer named Mackenzie, a man who had then been further inland than any other European. Upon passing the hut, the characters turn their eyes towards it “obediently” in honor of the predecessor who carved the way they presently follow (288). The party expresses reverence for past imperial activity and demonstrates a commitment to continue it themselves, which they do through both attitude and action.

Woolf also demonstrates how imperialist activity consolidates English identity through contact with the Other. In *Englishness Revisited*, Floraine Reviron-Piegay argues that Englishness is one part of a duality:

The content of ethnic or national identity can change from time to time depending on who is regarded as the other in contrast with whom one defines oneself. In other words, there is no “Englishness” in isolation. To understand English identity at any one time, we need to consider the context in which it is defined, that is the context in which, among other things, the English encounter people. (5)

Englishness exists as a category of identity only because of the existence of the Other, as Reviron-Piegay indicates. In the novel, the presence of the Other helps the group of English travelers define themselves. In fact, the narrator makes scant use of the word “English” in the text, only doing so in moments of imperial encounter. For example, when describing the South American village’s imperial history, the narrator says, “The reasons which had drawn the English across the sea to found a small colony within the last ten years are not so easily described” (90). The narrator only invokes the category of English in the colonial context. Similarly, the narrator describes a scene from the picnic, saying “The English fell silent; the natives who walked beside the donkeys broke into queer wavering songs [. . .]” (132). The group is English when they are directly alongside the “natives.” Once the travelers begin their journey up the river, the text officially consolidates their Englishness. The narrator notes,

By leaving Santa Marina early in the morning, driving twenty miles and riding eight, the party, which was composed finally of six English people,

reached the river-side as night fell. They came cantering through the trees  
[ . . . ] The tired little horses then stopped automatically, and the English  
dismounted. (276)

While the English people make several references to Englishness throughout the text, the narrator does not identify them as such until these particular moments. At the start of the imperial trek, the narrator uses the word English twice, in rapid succession, emphatically characterizing the group as English now that they begin their imperial voyage among the Others.

Another angle of imperialism that Woolf exposes in the novel is how imperial attitudes rely on the collective history of military (and therefore masculine) actions and reflect a masculinist national and imperial agenda that excludes women but to which they show devout loyalty. Evelyn Murgatroyd expresses a keen desire to be able to behave like an English imperial male. She says, “[. . .] I’d have liked to be one of those colonists, to cut down trees and make laws and all that, instead of just fooling about with all these people who think one’s just a pretty young lady” (196). Evelyn wants to *do* something, and she says so several times, discontent with the position relegated to her by virtue of her gender. Later, Evelyn expresses the same desire again as she listens to the men discuss the economic value South America could provide the British Empire, exclaiming, “How it makes one long to be a man!” She continues, “I’d raise a troop and conquer some great territory and make it splendid” (138). Mrs. Thornbury also expresses a desire to affiliate with the nation in the same way that men do, saying she should like to fly an airplane in the military. She says to the others, “If I were a young fellow, I should certainly qualify” (135). The female characters recognize that the nation’s history and its

military pursuits are a masculine territory that roundly excludes them. Instead of criticizing that which excludes, however, they express an earnest desire to be part of it, aligning themselves again, in belief if not practice, with the English nation.

As shown, English imperial history and the representation of it in the collection of texts referenced in the novel permeates categories of race and gender. The collective national history centers upon empire, both past and present manifestations of it, which in turn provides tropes for behavior for the individual characters. Because of their indoctrination into the English imperial nation, the characters reproduce the axiomatic of conquest, subordination, exploration, and exploitation during their travel in South America. English women also support and replicate this imperial behavior, despite the fact that it often subordinates and excludes them.

### **The Nation's Discontent: Rachel**

This section engages more directly with recent scholarship on *The Voyage Out*, augmenting the ideas that critics have put forth in terms of Rachel's demise and its connection to sexuality in England in this historical period. While early criticism examines the novel as an extension of Woolf's personal life, critics writing in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first century look at *The Voyage Out* as more of a cultural register than a personal one for Woolf. Jessica Tvordi

and Patricia Juliana Smith, for example, were some of the first to engage directly with Woolf's "sexual politics" and argue that *The Voyage Out* is a lesbian novel that subverts the traditional heterosexual marriage plot. Following suit, other scholars have begun to explore sexuality and marriage, English politics and domesticity, and English imperialism and its inherent racism in the text, for example, with a heavy emphasis on patriarchy's role in Rachel's undoing. This section draws on those ideas and offers a reading of Rachel's experience of marriage as mediated by the English imperial nation and the manifestations of it described thus far, such as the performance of Englishness, English literature and imperial history, and imperial tropes of behavior. In addition, Rachel also learns about the English class system, sexuality and the English institution of marriage and their connections to imperialism. By the end, Rachel disavows the systems of difference inherent in the imperial nation (class difference, gender difference, and racial difference) and desires autonomy instead of affiliation with these matrices.

Rachel's exposure to the class system begins early in the text and she soon understands her complicity, as a middle-class woman, in relegating the working class to the periphery of her culture. In a conversation about social issues with Richard, he asks her if she has ever seen a factory, which she has not. She declares, "I know nothing!" Rachel, the narrator notes, "had scarcely walked through a poor street, and always under the escort of her father, maids, or aunts" (62). Further into their conversation, Rachel expresses a vague knowledge of work performed around her, but she has no concrete associations with it: "Under the streets, in the sewers, in the wires, in the telephones, there is something alive; is that what you mean? In things like dust-carts, and men mending roads? You feel that all the time when you walk about London" (64). Rachel

senses that work happens around her, but she does not see the people who labor, except the obviously visible men mending roads. The working class that maintains the sewers and the telephone wires escapes her consciousness. She lives in a world with these amenities without realizing who supports the infrastructure. Along with this revelation, Rachel begins to see how her activities specifically relate to class structure. When discussing sea creatures, Rachel says, “Poor little goats!” Her father replies, “If it weren’t for goats there’d be no music, my dear; music depends upon goats” (17). Goats symbolize the lower classes by virtue of their position in the “lower waters,” as the narrator names it, and members of the working class in England are often compared to animals in this period, as they are in Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier*. When Rachel clashes with Mrs. Chailey, the maid, she returns to her room and, “unpacking her music, soon forgot all about the old woman and her sheets.” Rachel’s music obscures Mrs. Chailey and pushes her back into the periphery.

The English class system runs more deeply in the text than critics have discussed. The novel’s opening pages present the range of class difference as Helen observes it while she waits to board the ship. The narrator notes, “Observing that they passed no other hansom cab, but only vans and wagons, and that not one of the thousand men and women she saw was either a gentleman or a lady, Mrs. Ambrose understood that after all it was an ordinary thing to be poor.” Helen is “startled by this discovery” and exclaims, “poor creatures,” which merges with the earlier comparison of the working class to animals (7). Helen, like Rachel, has little understanding that the work performed by the people she sees in the streets supports the life that she leads as a middle-class woman. The narrator notes, “When one gave up seeing the beauty that clothed things, this was the

skeleton beneath” (6). The skeleton is the laboring group that remains unseen in the system that provides the ‘beautiful’ outer life that belongs to the middle and upper classes. Clarissa points to the skeleton when she talks to Helen about music, saying that she should like to shut herself up in a little world “with pictures and music and everything beautiful, and then I go out into the streets and the first child I meet with its poor, hungry, dirty little face makes me turn round and say, ‘No, I *can’t* shut myself up” (41). Clarissa recognizes that Rachel’s isolation with her music ignores the fact of the hungry, dirty child. These early passages signal the importance of class in the novel and its centrality in Rachel’s journey.

With the new-found knowledge that her music relies on those relegated to the periphery and a burgeoning awareness of the skeleton beneath the body of daily life, Rachel moves to the next phase of her embattled indoctrination, learning about sexuality and marriage. Rachel’s ambivalence toward sex emerges after Richard Dalloway kisses her shortly after their conversation in the ship. She thinks to herself later that “something wonderful had happened” and tells Helen that she did not mind the kiss until afterward” (79). The night following the kiss Rachel has a dream in which an ugly, deformed creature crouches at the end of a tunnel with damp, oozing walls. Critics agree that the dream represents heterosexuality and Rachel’s fear of it. Bland notes that “sexual hallucinations” like Rachel’s were thought to be characteristic of unmarried women (61). The dream expresses latent sexual desire, but that desire, for Rachel, is shrouded in disgust and fear, represented by the oozing walls and the menacing figure, respectively. Marcus argues that virginity symbolizes freedom and the loss of freedom accompanies the loss of virginity (15), an idea as terrifying as the crouching man for Rachel. Rachel’s



fear of sex has a direct historical corollary according to Lucy Bland, who argues that women in the period around World War I received contradictory messages about sexuality, something critics have yet to fully explore.<sup>9</sup> For decades, Bland notes, English women were conditioned to fear sex, told that it could lead to disease, pregnancy, and subordination through the white slave trade in which girls were abducted and forced to work in brothels, for example, or through prostitution. Evelyn specifically mentions the white slave trade to Rachel toward the end of the novel (259). While the dangers of sex were publicized in England through national and cultural avenues, so were representations of English women as chaste, as a moral compass for the nation, as the opposite of the highly-sexualized “dark” bodies thought to inhabit the colonies. English women were supposed to lack carnality, which was the basis for their “moral superiority” and role as protectors of the home and therefore the English ‘race’ (Bland 52). For women, sex was simultaneously a source of fear, but also their most valuable asset in the nation; the ways in which women in England in this period used their bodies would either cast them as the nation’s scourge or as the pristine mother and bearer of all that best represents the country. Complicating this conundrum is sexology’s, along with feminism’s, encouragement for women to embrace sexuality. Bland points out that “sexological concepts enabled heterosexual women to claim a right to the physicality of sex” (296). For English women, sex was the site onto which many conflicting messages about womanhood were projected and thus it is a source of extreme anxiety, as it is for Rachel.

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<sup>9</sup> No critic has fully traced contemporary ideas about women’s heterosexuality and Woolf’s treatment of it in the novel; most focus on the novel’s historical treatment of homosexuality instead.

Woolf flirts with homosexuality in the text and provides Rachel with a glimpse of it as one alternative possibility for her, one that she also rejects. Rachel spends time in Evelyn's and Miss Allan's rooms, alone with each of them, encounters that symbolize heterosexuality and homosexuality, respectively. Evelyn discusses her marriage proposals and heterosexual romances with Rachel. After she leaves Evelyn's room, Rachel watches women with blood-stained aprons decapitate and pluck chickens in the yard outside the hotel, an act of violence embedded between the scenes of Rachel's sexual indoctrination that foregrounds her ambivalence toward sexuality. Afterward, Miss Allan takes Rachel to her room where she feeds her ginger in a highly-sexualized manner, entreating her to "add a new pleasure to life" (264). Rachel staunchly rejects the ginger, symbolizing her rejection of homosexuality. Leaving to be alone in the hallway, Rachel exclaims to herself, "It's intolerable!" (268), seemingly referring to the two versions of sexuality depicted in the women's rooms. Mark Wollaeger argues that the decapitated chicken represents the sacrifice Rachel will have to make as a woman, arguing,

In a kind of dream logic, the decapitation of the chicken colors the subtly unsettling scenes with Miss Allan and Evelyn on either side, as if to say that any role available to women requires a sacrifice, a sacrifice Rachel will later embody while dying of fever. (52)

Wollaeger correctly identifies the way in which the dead chicken emblemizes Rachel's roles as a woman, but he does not specifically point out that the chicken is silenced, as Rachel would be once she affiliates with the nation in one of the roles made available to her, something that will be made clear to her by the end of the text.

Woolf's treatment of marriage leaves Rachel fearful of the loss of autonomy it would mean for her. Marriage validates women but, in turn, women have to support their husbands and the larger patriarchal, imperialist society. The narrator reveals that Helen Ambrose has to compromise her sense of self in her marriage, yielding to her husband's interests: "[Helen] gave way to him; she spoilt him; she arranged things for him; she who was all truth to others was not true to her husband" (252-53). Helen yields to her spouse, suppressing her instinct to be 'true' and presenting a false self for the sake of her husband's comfort. Similarly, Clarissa Dalloway supports Richard, a fact he proudly displays. Richard extols the virtues of a wife who supports her husband, telling Rachel that Clarissa spends her days calling, playing with children, and performing domestic duties, which means that "her illusions have not been destroyed," which he says gives him the "courage to go on" with his public duties (62-3). For Richard, the ideal wife lives under illusions. Helen cannot be true and Clarissa cannot know the truth. Both depictions of marriage for Rachel depend on falsity. However, in the contemporary English economy, a married woman has more social currency than a single woman, as Woolf demonstrates with Susan. Susan's aunt, Mrs. Paley, treats her differently now that she is engaged to be married. The narrator observes,

Directly [Susan] became engaged, Mrs. Paley behaved with instinctive respect, positively protested when Susan as usual knelt down to lace her shoes, and appeared really grateful for an hour of Susan's company where she had been used to exact two or three as her right. [Susan] therefore foresaw a life of far greater comfort than she had been used to [. . .] (183)

Susan's time and services are suddenly more valuable than they had been before she had a man to tend to. Marriage provides Susan a sense of financial and social stability that single women lack, but once married, women must put their interests aside in favor of their husband's, as Helen Ambrose and Clarissa Dalloway do.

Moreover, if Rachel were to remain single, the nation would still impose gender-specific expectations upon her, leaving her equally hemmed in. Spinster women in England in this period were expected to participate in the national imperial project by caring for other people's children, as Mrs. Thornbury indicates. This older, married woman who believes that children are the "crown" of a woman's life, asserts that, "Women without children can do so much for the children of others" (117). Mrs. Thornbury articulates the nation's expectation that women will either marry and bear proper English citizens or, if they remain single, they will assist in the raising of other peoples' children. Miss Allan represents another version of the single woman in the text. Miss Allan does not raise other people's offspring, but she engages in the masculine field of literature on its terms, adopting a masculine profession that marginalizes her in many ways. Between Miss Allan and the hypothetical single woman Mrs. Thornbury references, remaining single appeals to Rachel no more than becoming a wife.

Whether she marries or not, Rachel will still experience her adult life as a subordinated class in her culture by virtue of her gender. Terence points to women's exclusion when he tells Rachel that he has often walked by houses and wonders about the women inside. He continues,

Just consider: it's the beginning of the twentieth century, and until a few years ago, no woman had ever come out by herself and said things at all.

There it was going on in the background, for all those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life. Of course we're always writing about women—abusing them, or jeering at them, or worshipping them; but it's never come from women themselves [. . .] If one's a man, the only confidences one gets are from young women about their love affairs. But the lives of women of forty, of unmarried women, of working women, of women who keep shops and bring up children, of women like your aunts or Mrs. Thornbury or Miss Allan—one knows nothing whatever about them. They won't tell you. Either they're afraid, or they've got a way of treating men. (221)

Terence articulates English women's lack of representation in English culture, noting that they will not discuss themselves because of fear or because they choose to support the masculine status quo. Additionally, by omitting the commas in the phrase “curious silent unrepresented life,” Woolf makes the statement more adamant. It is less a description of a kind of life than an institutionalized life. Single or married, young or old, women lack inclusion in the national narrative. Gay Wachman observes that “Those with less power or money are silently to make the best of [it]; to speak embarrasses the powerful because it endangers the status quo” (9). Terence's description of these silent women foreshadows the position Rachel will find herself in whether she marries or remains single.

Rachel's experience with the native women she encounters in the jungle further complicates her exposure to the English institution of marriage, and this marks the key difference between my argument and other critical approaches to Rachel and signals the culmination of her recognition of her collusion with systems of difference, class and race,

specifically. Rachel's experience in the novel is mediated not only by the English nation and its constructions of womanhood. Because those constructions spring directly from encounters with the colonial other, the confluence of imperialism and representations of English female sexuality is also implicated in her death. First, as one outside of the dominant culture, Rachel observes it, thus embodying a contradictory postcolonial position. As Wollaeger argues, "Rachel tends to position herself like an ethnographer outside her own culture" (50). She observes those around her, as she does through the window at the hotel during a party one night, for example (100), and as she does on the journey into the jungle. In the jungle, the travelers come across a group of South American women and the people in each group observe each other. Lewis posits that this is the moment when Rachel's position in the world crystallizes for her. She argues that

Rachel's ultimate realization of the destiny of herself as a white, bourgeois female subject of the British Empire is to be part of the institutions of marriage and motherhood and to always see London as home. Crucial here is how this consolidation of the self is made possible by the erasure of the colonized culture in which it is realized, and by the ability to set oneself apart from that silenced culture. (118)

Rachel understands that the institutions of marriage and motherhood in the novel are only possible because of the presence of the colonial other against which such constructions of English marriage and motherhood are defined. Helen and her embroidery depicting the jungle and 'primitive' natives aptly symbolize this cultural configuration. Thompson argues that "[Helen] is herself confined even as she attempts to enclose the image of the world within her embroidery frame" (248), and Rachel understands that she occupies the

same position in the colonial relationship when she encounters the native women in the jungle. June Cummins argues that

Rachel learns that she participates in a dominant culture at the same time that she is oppressed by it. This ambiguous position results in relationships of mutual implication characterized by the always tangled but necessarily intertwined threads of race, class, and gender. (204)

Rachel understands that her culture subordinates her on the same basis that it has subordinated this other group of women. Her position as the representation of the pristine English body is only possible because of the presence of the native women she sees in the on the journey up the river.

Woolf further juxtaposes the English class system with the system of imperial exploitation through her characterization of Mrs. Flushing. The scenes in Evelyn's and Miss Allan's rooms are preceded by Mrs. Flushing showcasing for Rachel the native handicrafts she has collected in her room, the goods that she gets at a good price because the natives do not know their value. The scenes that immediately follow, in which Evelyn and Miss Allan represent the different roles available to Rachel as an English woman, are prefaced by this display of colonial exploitation. Woolf creates a triptych composed of these vignettes in which Rachel is alone with English women in their rooms and, hanging together, they reveal that middle-class English representations of womanhood and sexuality are preceded by imperial exploitation of the Other.

The standard reading of Rachel's death is as an expression of Woolf's fear of heterosexuality, as Tvordi and other critics have argued. I argue that, while sex and marriage would be Rachel's entry into the system of Englishness, Rachel chooses death

because she refuses to affiliate with the multiple systems of difference she has come to see, of which sexuality is only one. Rachel sees the constructions of national imperialism and the categories of identity it provides, but finds no alternative for herself. For example, while the other characters muse about England's past imperial presence in South America and absorb the South American landscape, Rachel sees humans, not separate races, not resources, but humans. When Terence asks what she is looking at when she observes members of her party, she replies, "Human beings" (137). Instead of seeing the characters around her as representations of social and political categories of being, sorted according to class, gender, and race, she sees human beings, uncategorized people. Rachel longs to be herself, too, instead of a member of a particular socio-political group, and she states that several times in the text.

Rachel's refusal to affiliate becomes clear when she catalogues for Evelyn the things in which she believes. When asked if she believes in anything, Rachel responds, "I believe in the bed, in the photographs, in the pot, in the balcony, in the sun" (260). She does not express belief in any English institution or English value, as the other characters often do, and she begins to realize that she wants autonomy instead of conformity with the culture around her. After her initial pleasure over her engagement to Terence, which would be her entry into the sex/gender system and the patriarchal English nation, she becomes reticent and withdrawn. Terence tells her, "There's something I can't get hold of in you. You don't want me as I want you—you're always wanting something else" (314). In response, the narrator notes, "It seemed to her now that what he was saying was perfectly true, and that she wanted many more things than the love of one human being—the sea, the sky" (315). Towards the end of the novel, the narrator notes that "she was



independent of [Terence]; she was independent of everything else” (327). Rachel wants autonomy, not marriage, two incompatible ways of living.

Knowing that, no matter what she chooses for herself, she will always be invisible in her culture as the lower class had been invisible to her, Rachel does recognize the subversive possibilities in being unseen. She says to Terence, “I like waking in Richmond Park and singing to myself and knowing it doesn’t matter a damn to anybody. I like seeing things go on—as we saw you that night when you didn’t see us—I love the freedom of it—it’s like being the wind or the sea” (224). She understands that being unseen could make her powerful, like the wind or the sea, and that one can capitalize on knowledge garnered by observing while unobserved. But unless those possibilities are realized, and no way to do so ever appears in the text, one remains simply invisible, like the parlor maid who kills herself. St. John’s mother mentions to him in a letter that the maid poisoned herself (318) and her suicide merges with Rachel’s death and conflates class and gender by illustrating that women, no matter their status, have no voice. The maid’s story is told through somebody else’s voice and Lewis argues that the representation of the maid remains “in the hands of the racist, classist and gendered elite,” and that it consolidates “the imperialistic nature of English domestic politics at the time which interpreted the language of the lower classes as either falsehood, nonsense, or inaudible” (112). Neither the maid nor Rachel will ever be heard, both as silent as the women in all those homes in England to which Terence refers. Facing a lifetime of silence in the imperial nation, Rachel chooses another kind of silence, that which comes with death, but one that she chooses for herself. In short, death reveals itself as the only agency she can manage to secure.

## CONCLUSION

In “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf describes herself as a fish in a stream, “held in place,” but she finds herself unable to describe the water (14). The characters in *The Voyage Out* are similarly deflected, similarly “held in place.” A strong current of nationalism and imperial propaganda that operates similarly to Woolf’s stream restricts their thoughts and actions: it guides and directs while remaining unseen. English nationalism and British imperialism form the bedrock of the English culture that Woolf explores in the text. In the same essay, Woolf writes,

Unfortunately, one only remembers what is exceptional. And there seems to be no reason why one thing is exceptional and another not. Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember? Why remember the hum of bees in the garden going down the beach, and forget completely being thrown naked by father into the sea? (11)

The process of indoctrination in England during this period took place so quietly and was so naturalized that those trained remember nothing about it because it was for them nothing exceptional. The process works so subtly that the English believed they were born that way, not made. Rachel, never indoctrinated in her culture, learns about the expectations her culture has for her once she interacts with the others on the voyage, and those expectations all leave her silenced. Turning to death as the only way out, Rachel

represents the others in the novel who have also been silenced, like the parlor maid and the native women in South America upon which her identity as an English female is constructed. As such, the only way to interpret the novel in a way that makes it cohere is to read it as a testament to the role of the British Empire in formulating the nation and its gender roles.

## Chapter Two

### The Spinster and the Colonial Other in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*

#### INTRODUCTION

*The window-smashing of last march [1912] was not effective, though it might have been had they been smashed from the inside of the drapery shop and not outside.*

--Rebecca West<sup>1</sup>

West, a sharp social critic and journalist, was deeply involved in the struggle for women's rights that was one of the hallmarks of the historical moment during which she lived as young woman in England. George Bernard Shaw noted that West handled the pen "savagely," a tool she used throughout her lengthy writing career to fight for social justice for women in her early life and later more broadly for human rights. West's fiction does not always seem overtly political, especially *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), her first novel, which many have summarized as a psychological novel that recounts the horrors of war and its fallout. Upon closer observation and analysis, however, one can see that West's novel depicts the English nation, its economy, its landscape, its class structure, its ideologies, and more, and thereby reveals key ways in which the Empire sits

at the center of it all—in the center of the country manor house as much as in the center of the national economy.

West's novel also exposes the ways in which English nationalism and imperialism are distinctly gendered, both relying on what are considered masculine characteristics (such as demonstrated in military activity, for example), yet both using the feminine body as a marker of English identity and one of the sites around which the nation mobilizes sentiment. Additionally, West depicts how these articulations of gendered nationalism and imperialism align with the class system in England during this period. Moreover, West's novel enacts on an individual level, through the relationships between characters, specific elements of the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, demonstrating how England creates the colonial Other at home as a means of further strengthening the connection between modern English nationalism and imperialism. While the novel's action takes place entirely in England among the English, the novel reveals that the same discourses and ideologies that underpin the colonial relationship between the English and the Other in the far-flung colonies inform the relationships between the upper-middle-class and lower-class English citizenry. The novel likens the different classes to two distinct racial categories, implicitly exposing the ways in which the axiomatics of modern English nationalism and imperialism work in tandem at home and abroad. Not only does England claim the right to impose itself on other groups of people around the globe, but, as schools, movies, magazines, and other cultural and political outlets at that time indicate, it also invokes a God-bestowed duty to spread a civilizing influence to the natives in other lands to justify imperial activity, another idea

West threads through *The Return of the Soldier*. The perceived noble qualities of Englishness that bestow this “civilizing duty” are very much marked by class.

West also incorporates another phenomenon of this historical period just before and during World War I: many English identified themselves so closely with the Empire that one cannot adequately discuss modern English nationalism and imperialism separately. In fact, England’s government and citizens felt such acute anxiety about losing key elements of national imperial identity, such as foreign territories and perceived English racial purity, that they generated an increased celebration of those very things, as evidenced by the robust celebration of Empire Day and the popularity of postcards featuring scenes from imperial lands. The presence of the Empire was arguably the cornerstone of collective English identity. Subsequently, the fear of revolt in the colonies leading to massive upheaval and the simultaneous fear of invasion from the continent created a heightened sense of awareness of Englishness. In the face of its potential demise, according to David Powell,

[. . .] a cruder race patriotism came to the surface in the eugenics movement and in the language prejudices of the time, including a heightened anti-Semitism and increased hostility in some areas (like the East End of London) to foreign immigrants and refugees. (124)

Fear of the Other crystallized in the face of national threat and boundaries, geographic and cultural, seemed more important than ever to protect and reinforce. Cultural boundaries, namely the division of ‘race,’ could be enforced in England by creating dislike and fear of those outside the pale of English blood. West demonstrates how the fear of the Other works to quarantine those in the lower classes in England as well.

In addition to a heightened fear of the Other, the English pastoral also occupied a central place in popular national sentiment and official versions of national imperialist propaganda in this period, with the manor house as the focal point, as the repository of English values. Official British military propaganda in the early-twentieth century, for example, magnified this nostalgia for the English countryside and featured it as what the soldiers defended. Popular national sentiment, as represented in magazines, literature, and museum exhibits, to name just a few vehicles for dissemination, figured rural England as the antithesis of war, making the country's cottages, stone fences, and fields the site of stability, health, and sanctity, the opposite of the destruction happening on the continent. Taking as a catalyst the unrest in the colonies, the threat of invasion, and the violence of the war, the government and media pushed the idea of the English countryside as an inviolate space in which the best of England is made manifest into the foreground of the national imagination. West engages with the popular notions of the landscape, depicting them as fabricated and false and revealing how they operate vis-à-vis the Empire, helping to reproduce oppressive imperial tropes at home, in the metropole.

The countryside's centrality in the English national imagination coincides with the proliferation of images of motherhood in this period and the characterization of England as Britannia (female, mother) that feature prominently in official forms of English nationalism and spring from the same social and political sources as the increased celebration of the pastoral. The figure of the innocent, white, English female thus merges with the idealization of the landscape, which makes the female body the site of national longing as well. In *Lesbian Empire*, Gay Wachman argues that "the myth of feminine innocence—that middle- and upper-class women have no sexual desire—was

basic to imperialist patriarchal hegemony” (10). The rise of eugenics and the proliferation of the idea that natives of the colonies and members of other “races” were overly sexual (“scientific” discourse of the time positioned the Irish, for example, as an inferior race) counterbalanced notions that middle- and upper-class English women had no sexual desire. The more the Other was classified as degenerate, the more Englishness could be sanitized, and such cleansing takes place through the use of the female body, literally as bearers of the “race” and figuratively as representatives of the nation and its ideals.

Debra Rae Cohen similarly argues that “wartime propaganda exploited images of traditional femininity as well as the traditional nostalgic equation of woman and home, urging women to persuade men to help prevent the violation of England’s female space” (5). In short, wartime propaganda capitalized on notions of the nobility, purity, and stoicism of maternity, drawing an implicit (and sometimes explicit) parallel between Mother England and the mothers of soldiers sent to the front. Zillah Eisenstein also calls attention to the importance of maternal figures in the nation: “[in nationalism] women are the mothers of *all* children of the nation” (41). Women define the nation and notions of masculinity as well, as Eisenstein notes, arguing, “Women guard the home and create domesticity against which men construct their fictive manliness” (42). Eisenstein continues, “the female/maternalized body becomes the site for *viewing* the nation. It is an imaginary site that is wholly naturalized through the symbolization of the female body” (43). As Woolf famously argues in *A Room of One’s Own*, women serve as “looking-glasses” that “[reflect] the figure of man at twice its natural size” (35). With dominion over their households modeled after the Christian notion of the patriarchal family, men



can see themselves as powerful and superior and then have the confidence to exercise control over other groups of people.

Not only are women the site on which national ideals are projected and made manifest, but women themselves in this historical moment were expected to participate in propagating national sentiment and promoting national interests by instilling in their children national sentiment and supporting the war by sending their sons, husbands, and brothers to fight. Imperialism appears to be separate and distinct from modern English nationalism, but *The Return of the Soldier* challenges this distinction. The need for women to serve as nurturing mothers merged sharply with the aforementioned growth in eugenics, which increased the degree to which the female body became the site of anxiety about race. Women carried the dual burdens of bearing and indoctrinating new citizens and ensuring that their offspring were “racially” pure. Jane Garrity argues that, within the context of waning imperialism, “ideas of *nation* and *empire* were imbricated in one another precisely through tropes of the female reproductive body,” but not just any female body. Garrity carefully points out that the white, middle- and upper-class female body was regarded as the integral factor in preserving perceived racial purity and English integrity (2). West explores the various ways in which the lower-class female body is pushed to the periphery in England in favor of the middle- and upper-class white female body, the only one sanctioned to represent the nation and bear the children who will continue the national imperial project. West also invokes whiteness as a distinct racial category that emerges only in relation to a darker Other, a central prong of British imperialism.

In sum, this chapter investigates how West critiques these prevalent threads of English national imperialism in *The Return of the Soldier*. The novel provides space for exploring how landscape, gender, race, and class intimately relate and why one can only fully understand their connections by examining them within the imperial context. The text demonstrates that categories of gender, race, and class come into being directly alongside the Empire and that English culture relies on imperial tropes to establish and maintain social boundaries even within the nation in an effort to preserve perceived ‘racial’ purity. The novel examines modern imperial nationalism, the ways in which it is distinctly gendered, and its multiple embedded contradictions, something that critics have yet to fully discuss in regard to this text. The body of criticism on this text is relatively small and contains only a handful of brief references to empire. Most critics examine it as a commentary on World War I and the psychological fall out. This chapter will argue that the war acts as a backdrop for West’s larger observations about the condition of English women (and men) at this particular historical moment that operate in a much more global context than critics have previously recognized. Perhaps this lack of critical study indicates that prevailing ideologies are so naturalized in both the contemporary culture and the text that they hardly appear. Indeed, the reader has to look very carefully in order to see the shadowy but mammoth presence of the Empire lurking behind the words on every page.

## ***THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER***

*Make of a nation what you will*

*Make of the past*

*What you can—*

*There is now*

*A woman in a doorway.*

*--from "Anna Liffey," by Eavan Boland*

*The Return of the Soldier* is composed of a flashback narrative that takes place primarily in one setting, Baldry Court, in which the English nation and British Empire are made manifest inside its walls, on its grounds, and in the cast of characters who act out their individual roles prescribed by both the nation and the Empire. The women in the novel enforce cultural practices at the expense of the male character, Chris, a British soldier who seeks an alternative to his position as husband and head of his estate, roles he finds burdensome. Chris's war-inflicted amnesia means that he only remembers his life as he lived it fifteen years earlier, the centerpiece of which was his love affair with a country girl named Margaret. Margaret, now a grown, shop-worn, lower-class woman, represents the outer boundary of the nation in the novel. West marks the center of the

nation with Chris' upper-middle-class wife, Kitty. With his memory impaired, Chris wants desperately to be with Margaret, whom the narrator repeatedly compares to barnyard animals and insects – as something outside of human society—but he remains instead unhappily bound by law and custom to Kitty and their household. Margaret and Jenny finally help restore his memory and thus restore him to duty to England's war.

### **The Spinster**

One of the central features of *The Return of the Soldier* is West's narrative strategy. She uses Jenny, the first-person narrator who provides the sole perspective for the reader. Jenny, Chris's cousin, resides at Baldry Court because she has no husband and no means to procure a living for herself as an upper-middle-class woman. The romance plot Jenny presents is less significant than her own response to it, which stands as one of the novel's key innovative elements. In addition to voicing the connections between English imperial nationalism, the imperial economy, landscape, and gender roles, Jenny herself and the change she undergoes in the narrative process are central to the story. The novel also provides an enlightening depiction of how a spinster like Jenny, ambiguous in her social status, also acts ambiguously, at once critical of national and imperial processes and one of their mouthpieces, which this chapter will argue. The novel's importance is thus twofold: as an exploration of the dialectics of nation and empire and of one woman's experience within those institutions. West has yet to be given credit for

examining the connections between modern English nationalism and imperialist ideology, their distinctly gendered attributes, and the contradictions inherent within them.

Jenny's ambiguous position in the imperial nation—privileged by her race in an international context but subordinated by her gender in England—makes her centrality to the text she narrates especially significant. West chose an unmarried, childless female precariously placed in the upper-middle class to serve as the lone voice in her text, a woman with no political, financial, or maternal agency. Jenny, and other middle- and upper-class spinsters like her, seem especially superfluous during war time since they are not giving birth to new citizens to replace those lost in the war, nor are they helping to defend the Empire in tangible ways by bearing arms against enemies or bringing in wages to bolster the strained economy. An unmarried woman of a lower class could earn a living in a factory or in domestic service, but Jenny's class standing largely limits her to the work she can do in the manor house, which for her entails decorating and helping keep an organized life for Kitty and Chris. Spinsters in England during this period were expected to help indoctrinate other women's children into proper English citizens, but Chris and Kitty have no children to train. In short, as a spinster, the nation does not identify Jenny as the kind of woman that traditionally represents the nation, as Mother England who sends her sons to fight for the purity of the English landscape and the righteousness of English imperial ideals, the Mother England portrayed in many military recruitment posters, for example. Jenny, privileged by her class status but rendered invisible by her gender, is also privileged by her race. While she has no representation in her country because her role is limited (she is neither wife nor mother), she has legitimacy as a member of the imperial metropole.

The intersection of her gender, class, and racial status provides Jenny with access, even if only as an observer, to one of the centers of English imperial power—the manor house— by virtue of her connection to Chris. She has access to the upper-middle-class, patriarchal home, but no claim to power in it since she is not Chris’ wife nor does she have English children to indoctrinate. As such, Jenny is essentially invisible in her historical moment, which means she can quietly observe those around her, mentally recording the minutest details about their lives and their significance. West’s novel depicts Jenny as potentially subversive, able to observe and record while remaining unseen. Does West gesture toward Jenny’s potential for subversion when she plays German music the night Chris returns home from the war front? Kitty says to her, “I could have told that you would have chosen to play German music, this night of all nights” (29). Jenny’s story is a depiction of one upper-middle-class English woman’s consciousness as informed by the culture around her, and it reveals her powerful observations that come simultaneously from the fringes and from the center, from the fringes of matters of national interest, like the war and the economy, and yet from the center of the class and race around which all imperial sentiments revolve. Jenny’s narrative ostensibly recounts only the story of Chris’s amnesia and its subsequent effects on the manor house, but she also makes intense observations about the mechanisms of the British Empire, its politics and economics, and its reliance on the traditional English class structure with its inherent primitivist underpinnings that are the true subject of West’s novel.

This chapter explores Jenny’s complicity with hegemonic normalcy in some ways because she reproduces nationalist and imperial ideology even as she undermines it,

pointing to the ambiguity lies at the novel's core. Jenny spies and uses the tools available to her to reinforce the codes of English culture and to restore Chris' memory at the novel's end, thus returning him to the nation and helping to maintain the status quo. Jenny also reproduces colonial tropes of behavior when she racializes Margaret and thus creates the foil against which women like Kitty derive their identity as the national emblem for purity and virtue. Jenny, from within the center of power that is Baldry Court, reproduces colonial ideology in her narrative treatment of Margaret as native and therefore as Other. However, Jenny eventually endorses the cross-class relationship between Chris and Margaret and projects onto them her own sexual desire. Jenny's position on the periphery of English culture by virtue of her gender and her unmarried, childless status, further complicates her Othering of Margaret and emphasizes the contradictory ways that gender and class align in the imperial context.

### **The Empire and the Manor House**

*The Return of the Soldier* is ostensibly a romance. In it, Jenny recounts the tale of Chris and Margaret and the love that they lost and then found, only to have to lose it again. The novel does not make any direct references to the Empire, and yet the Empire is central to understanding the critique embedded in Jenny's narrative. Jenny depicts the manor house in a way that illuminates its connection to the imperial economy and imperial power structures, foregrounding women's role as participants in empire as

consumers and as propagators of imperial tropes of behavior, specifically those of expansionist imperialism.

West makes numerous oblique gestures to the economic foundation of Baldry Court and its connection to the larger imperial economy that, when connected, reveal an understanding that every corner of the well-kept manor house represents economic aspects of the British Empire. As Raymond Williams argues, country houses were the “apex of a local system of exploitation” that had many connections to distant lands (280). The domestic and imperial economies are linked, as they both sustain England and its infrastructure, the domestic by creating demand (for the acquisition of material goods, for example) and the imperial by providing materials and labor to meet demand and reinforce British economic stability. West also delineates the division of gender roles among the English upper-middle class and how men and women contribute to the imperial economies in different but equally important ways, women as consumers and men as the ones in control of imperial labor and resources.

Some of the novel’s first pages reveal that Kitty and women of her class are handmaidens to the British economy by virtue of their consumerism. The text features descriptions of Baldry Court that catalogue some of the estate’s contents, such as antique furniture and rich, brightly-colored fabrics. Jenny says that when Kitty married Chris, she “picked up [Chris’s] conception of normal expenditure and carelessly stretched it as a woman stretches a new glove on her hand” (8). Jenny makes reference to Kitty’s fine things, like silk underclothes, delicately embroidered dressing gowns, expensive dresses, and the abundance of labor performed both in the house and on its grounds. Baldry Court and the women in it have high operating expenses. When his father died, Chris was



obliged to take over the family business, an enterprise that “was weighted by the needs of a mob of female relatives who were all useless either in the old way with antimacassars or in the new way with golf clubs” (8). These upper-middle class women spend money, on household and personal decoration and on leisure time, mounting up expenses. The reference to antimacassars specifically points to the imperial economy, as macassar oil was made from trees from the tropics and Victorian men used it to condition their hair. Women like Kitty and this “mob of female relatives” purchase goods and services to fuel an economy that in turn fuels imperial expansion; Kitty, the needs of the country house, and the female relatives all keep Chris working at the helm of the business that relies on colonial labor and natural resources, thus fueling both the geographic expansion of the Empire and the cultural colonization that ensues.

This domestic consumption directly supports the British Empire and its control over natives in colonies across the globe. Because the narrator calls the female relatives “useless” while simultaneously demonstrating their significant agency as consumers of material goods and services, she draws attention to one of the myths of English imperial nationalism. The text deftly questions the accuracy of the contemporary, prevailing notion that women are isolated in the domestic sphere and have no connection to the Empire other than acting as symbolic representations of the motherland. At one point, Jenny says that the chintz sang the vulgar old English country-house song” (74), which indicates that the “English” house is marked by cultural and political specificity. Here West depicts the chintz as embedded in the matrix of social categories: it is English, in a particular historical moment, in an upper-middle-class home in the country, which exposes the normally invisible underpinnings of the material items in the house. The

economy of the manor has ties to the imperial territories, and the material goods contained in the home are key pieces of the imperial center, representing resources gained through an oppressive economic system. Chris's work in the mining industry in the colonies emphasizes the family's capitalization on foreign territories. The manor house garners income from imperial exploitation that upper-middle-class English women, although they do not labor themselves, maintain through expenditure.

Moreover, Kitty enacts the imperialist expansionist mindset when she reminds Chris, as she knits clothing for one of the cottagers, that "We—we've a lot of responsibilities, you and I. With all the land you've bought there's ever so many people to look after..." (29). She and Chris are responsible for the care of the people whose territory they have taken over, echoing the English attitude towards people in colonial territories whose land was similarly appropriated. In *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset*, Philippa Levine notes that the British expansionist viewpoint regards England's imperial presence as a benefit to the colonized and posits British governance as "the finest and noblest expression of humanity" (104). Kitty's expression of the need to "look after" the people on the land they have bought echoes the same sentiment that underpins imperial expansion.

As Jed Esty notes, "To do subtle justice to the cultural and literary aspects of metropolitan power in the English sphere, we must chart imperialism's presence not only in the visible and narrative data but as unexpected formal encryptments and thematic outcroppings in ostensibly domestic texts" (6). *The Return of the Soldier* is ostensibly a domestic text, but its "narrative data" leave just enough breadcrumbs for readers to decode the "encryptments" that reveal the connections between Baldry Court and the

British Empire. The description of Baldry Court's economic dominance over the lower classes who live in its environs mirrors England's imperialist expansionist behavior just as surely as Chris and Kitty support the imperial economy.

### **The English Rose and the Imperial Other**

The manor house has material ties to the British imperial economy and it reflects one of the dominant imperial tenets of "benevolent" rule. Deepening the connection between the manor house and the Empire, West also imbricates Jenny and Kitty in reproducing imperial racism that proliferated in the inter-war period during which West wrote the novel. Jenny and Kitty prop up the notion of the upper-middle-class, white, English woman as the repository for the nation's values. The years surrounding World War I witnessed a heightened awareness of race difference, ideas that the field of eugenics helped to amplify. Wachman describes how the eugenics movement at the turn of the century caused the nation to focus on selective breeding as an act of "national efficiency." Wachman continues, 'The race' came to mean 'the nation' as well as 'whiteness'; nationalism and imperialism became synonymous" (53). Fear and hatred of the Other, a central prong of imperialist ideology, align with the national challenge to maintain a successful population in the face of wartime threats from abroad, and thus, as Wachman argues, nationalism and imperialism conflate. In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock argues that imperialism

is “not something that happened elsewhere [ . . . ] Rather, imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity.” McClintock tracks the way in which race discourse was invented and practiced in the metropole and was central in defining the middle and upper class. Moreover, the invention of race provided justification for policing the “dangerous classes,” of which the working class was central (5). McClintock also argues that the categories of race and gender are simultaneously constructed and mutually inform one another. McClintock’s claim helps to reveal how West’s novel becomes a site for investigating how the construction of race, gender, and class merge in the metropole in this era. The novel demonstrates that the construction of England’s lower classes as the Other overlaps with the production of English gender roles because it provides the foundation upon which the idealized English women stands. I do not intend to argue that the construction of race in England facilitated the use of racism in the Empire or vice versa; rather, I intend to demonstrate that the method of devaluing the Other for the sake of defining one’s self, whether at home or abroad, operates in a similar fashion.

West demonstrates how the imperial model of racism functions in the metropole through explicit comparisons between Margaret and Kitty that frame England’s lower classes as the domestic counterpart to the Other races of the British Empire, both cast as racially inferior. West reveals that Jenny and Kitty view Margaret as outside the nation despite her English citizenship, and their revulsion towards her mirrors imperial notions of the other from which the vision of the pure, white, middle-class English woman springs. Cohen argues that Baldry Court and its environs enact the colonial relationship between the imperial center and the periphery:

The estate is the British Empire in miniature, the Ethos of Baldry Court pushing outward from the house to subdue the rebellious natives; and just as “natives” becomes a term of opprobrium, the natural is demonized as “wild.” The “controlled beauty” of Baldry Court, like the “civilizing mission” of the empire, becomes naturalized, the accepted norm. (73)

Cohen invokes the empire in her evaluation of Baldry Court, rightly comparing the two, but she does not adequately address Margaret’s treatment as one of “the natives.”

West uses the language of imperialism to represent Margaret in the narrative as a woman outside the nation, something dark and primitive, and something that becomes dangerous when it crosses firmly-established social boundaries. West emphasizes Margaret’s perceived racial difference from the women of Baldry Court by doggedly comparing her to farm animals and insects. She has the “heaviness of the fraught-ox or the big trusted dog” (10); she “butted like a clumsy animal at a gate she was not intelligent enough to open” (13); she is like “an old horse nosing over a gate,” and her clear patient gaze is the same as that “of animals and peasant stock” (14). Jenny also focuses intensely on the sound of Margaret’s cheap stays and the seams of her dirty pig-skin purse that she drops on the floor. She says, “I pushed the purse away from me with my toe and hated her as the rich hate the poor, as insect things that will struggle out of the crannies which are their decent home, and introduce ugliness to the light of day” (14). Furthermore, the seams, cracks, and gates in Jenny’s descriptions of Margaret symbolize the boundaries between the women that might have otherwise remained invisible by acting as the sites where unwanted creatures can creep through otherwise guarded places. Margaret’s presence calls attention to the boundaries of both class and racial division and

also highlights their points of vulnerability, the weak spots where Jenny thinks somebody as unpleasant as Margaret can come wriggling through like a bug. In this case, the critical weak point is Chris's memory. Margaret highlights the social division between herself and the women of Baldry Court and demonstrates through her very presence how an intruder as unpleasant as herself can come squirming through the cracks, but she proves herself even more destructive as she points out the fissures in Chris's relationship with the women in his house and in his life as a whole. By crossing firmly-established boundaries, Margaret draws attention to the weak spots in imperial ideology.

Jenny also reproduces imperial thinking by focusing on Margaret's hands and her dirty boots, by fetishizing the Other. By maintaining her gaze on her hands and boots, Jenny fragments the disheveled woman, seeing only pieces of Margaret and not an entire person, thus reducing her humanity. McClintock argues that "dirt expresses a relation to social value" (152). Jenny gazes on the pieces of Margaret that she uses for labor and that mark her social position. She emphasizes Margaret's role as one of the working classes viewed as wheels and cogs in the mechanism, valued only for their ability to perform necessary work. In effect, Jenny makes Margaret a counter-example her idea of a national feminine standard that only promotes images of middle- and upper-class women like Kitty. By rejecting Margaret and seeing her in fragments, Jenny invalidates Margaret and casts her as that which does not belong.

Moreover, Jenny mentions Kitty's white skin numerous times in the novel, and the descriptions of Margaret's skin stand out by comparison. Margaret is not white; she is something else, something racially Other, as even her name implies: Mrs. William Grey. In their first encounter, Jenny notices Margaret's "seamed red hand which looked even

more horrible when she presently raised it to touch the glistening flowers of the pink azalea that stood on a table beside her” (10). At the sight of her, Kitty shivers, as Jenny does later when she sees Margaret again on her errand to bring her to Chris. Jenny carefully points out the difference between Margaret and the beautiful, white nymph that Kitty selected to adorn the hall at Baldry Court:

[Margaret] hovered with her back to the oak table, fumbling with her thread gloves, winking her tear-red eyes, tapping with her foot on the carpet, throwing her weight from one leg to the other, and constantly contrasted her appearance with the new acquisition of Kitty’s decorative genius which stood so close behind her on the table that I was afraid it might be upset by one of her spasmodic movements. This was a shallow black bowl in the centre of which crouched on hands and knees a white naked nymph, her small head intently drooped to the white flowers that floated on the black waters all around her. Beside the pure black of the bowl, her rusty plumes looked horrible; beside that white nymph, eternally innocent of all but the contemplation of beauty, her opaque skin and her suffering were offensive. (56)

The white nymph gazes on the white flowers, their whiteness underscored by the black bowl and the black water that surrounds them. Jenny refers to it twice as the “white nymph,” emphasizing the significance of its whiteness, especially when compared to Margaret, with her red eyes and sallow skin.

The nymph in the center of Baldry Court emblemizes Kitty’s position as the white, upper-middle-class female positioned as the centerpiece of imperial national

sentiment, and it is characterized by its difference from that which is not white, not pure, not graceful, and that which is marked by labor. This scene demonstrates how West points to the connection between gender, race, and class in imperial England that helps to define English racial purity and womanhood, another key component of English nationalism. Garrity discusses how nationalism uses middle- and upper-class English women as racialized symbols for the motherland, saying that “the female body, though permeable and unstable, is associated with racial superiority” (4). These women are racialized because their whiteness only exists against darkness, whether that is the dark skin of colonial natives or the presence of England’s lower classes who are characterized as dark, dirty, and inferior, as Margaret is. Kathleen Wilson posits that “femininity and womanhood were defined in terms that distinguished not just British women from savages, but British middle-class women from working women: in both cases, capacity for labor, sexual proclivities and lusts, and fecundity become the markers through which proper femininity and its variants were signified” (44). Kitty, represented by the white nymph, is signified by her difference from Margaret, the variant.

Jenny relegates Margaret to the periphery and any indication that Margaret crossed her social boundary to form an alliance with Chris deeply offends Jenny and Kitty, who have a vested interest in maintaining the boundaries established by national imperialist practices. Jenny, by focusing on Margaret’s hands and the dirt on her boots, demonstrates one of the ways in which women reproduce nationalist imperialist ideology, even though she rebukes elements of it later in the novel (I will take up the issue of Jenny’s ambiguity in another section). As Cohen notes, “[*The Return of the Soldier*] renders nation and domestic space as contiguous, but in West’s novel [. . .] that equation



is revealed as self-deluding and retrogressive, a model that renders women complicit” (10). Women act as the embodiment of national virtue and Jenny and Kitty, by looking down on Margaret and relegating her to the margins, act as keepers of national memory and perceived racial purity.

It is also significant that herself Kitty purchased the nymph, both an expense that keeps the economy moving and a symbolic representation of her own role as the woman of the English national imagination, white, beautiful, and innocent—attributes Margaret does not share with her dull skin, red eyes, and aura of hardship. Jenny worries that Margaret will topple the sculpture, a concern that is certainly more figurative than literal, and Margaret’s presence is in fact disruptive and eventually succeeds in toppling much of Jenny’s world view. In her introduction to *Step-daughters of England*, Garrity points out that Englishness as a racial category is “consolidated precisely through that which it claims to exclude, so that the subject’s encounter with ‘spaces of alterity’ actually underwrites and produces Englishness” (22). She also points out that scientific discourse during the late-nineteenth century promulgated the notion that race does not just signal skin color, but also ethnic and cultural differences (22), which is precisely how the text deploys descriptions of Margaret. Jenny casts her outside the accepted notion of the English race and the category of the English woman, defining herself and Kitty even more clearly as English. Jenny’s encounter with Margaret allows her to shore up her notion that Kitty emblemizes the purity and virtue of Englishness.

West cements the difference between the vision of the ideal English woman and the racialized Other by comparing Kitty to the English Rose, an age-old symbol for English womanhood. Kitty is the English rose and Margaret is the thistle. Descriptions of

Kitty are replete with references to roses. For example, her “little silken jacket” is trimmed with rosebuds, her gardens are full of them, her car is decorated with a silver vase full of Christmas roses, and even her complexion is described as rosy. In a general description of Kitty early in the text, Jenny says, “Kitty, whose beauty was as changed in grief from its ordinary seeming as a rose in moonlight is different from a rose by day” (22). Later, Jenny says that Kitty’s flesh “glowed like a rose” by the fire (26), and her hands are often “rosy” (74). When the doctor arrives at Baldry Court to examine Chris in an attempt to cure his amnesia, Kitty sits in her oak chair “like a white rosebud that was still too innocent to bloom” (79). Margaret, by comparison, has “some yellow crocus and some sodden squills” in her front garden (44) and cabbages in the back. Jenny implies through these pointed references to flowers that Kitty is the kind of woman carefully tended to, manicured, cultivated, and controlled, while Margaret is the type that grows outside the garden, in the wild, on the periphery, without any cultivating. The border of scillas and crocuses at Baldry Court’s entrance is “purely philosophic,” Jenny points out, saying that “it proclaims that here we estimate only controlled beauty, that the wild will not have its way within our gates” (55). Kitty, as the English rose, is the image cultivated and propagated by the nation to represent it, and Margaret is something other than that, something wild that has no place in the English garden of nationalism; Margaret is the primitive that the borders of the manor house were set up to keep out. As the pampered, sheltered, inviolate rose, Kitty represents England because she is the opposite of what the natives in the colonies are in the imperial imagination and the emblem of what the nation stands to lose if foreign invasion materializes. The English garden of nationalism forms part of the larger sense of British imperial identity along with the pastoral, and Margaret

has no place in it aside from serving as the Other at home (in England) in order for the middle and upper-middle classes to exercise their feelings of virtue and superiority and, more importantly, to allow Kitty to represent what Margaret herself is not. Margaret, by virtue of her class and capacity for labor, provides the space for Kitty to be the white model of English feminine virtue, the rose, the symbol of the nation's pride.

### **The Landscape of Empire**

Landscape also serves as a marker of English national values in this period, and images of the rural English countryside abound in the era's imperial propaganda, often held up as what England's soldiers were fighting for. West demonstrates how the idea of the landscape also props up the English class system and makes class division appear naturalized. For West, the use of the rural English landscape as a repository of national values makes it suspect and vulnerable to manipulation, and the country house, the focal point of the rural landscape, also bears blame in her critique because it reproduces the imperial relationship between the metropole and the periphery. In the text, Jenny eventually provides an alternative model for a relationship with the pastoral, one that privileges individual engagement with nature in a way that privileges autonomy rather than the needs of the English national collective.

West begins *The Return of the Soldier* with a detailed description of the manor house and its grounds and uses the estate to demonstrate how it functions in the same way

as the British landscape does within the national imaginary, both through official imperial propaganda and through popular cultural representations, as something observed, preserved, and remembered. “A working landscape is hardly ever a landscape,” Williams argues: “The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation [. . .] It is in the act of observing that landscape forms” (120-26). Landscape, then, is subject to aestheticization and manipulation, as West demonstrates. The text makes clear to the reader Baldry Court’s role in the national imagination. In the novel’s first pages, Jenny recalls looking out of a window and says to the reader:

You probably know the beauty of that view; for when Chris rebuilt Baldry Court after his marriage, he handed it over to architects who had not so much the wild eye of the artist as the knowing wink of the manicurist, and between them they massaged the dear old place into matter for innumerable photographs in the illustrated papers. (4)

The grounds of Baldry Court are seen by the public through images in illustrated papers and by its residents through windows that separate the observer from the observed, as Williams describes. West criticizes the dominant notion of landscape in early twentieth-century England by characterizing it as a construction used as a tool of national indoctrination. Landscape, traditionally, has value in this period because of how people see it rather than because of its actual value as a place to grow food, keep livestock, or walk through and experience nature. Nothing essential about the land itself has been incorporated into the national imagination. Instead, nationalism relies on the connection between the land and ideas about England’s essence as being connected to a pastoral way of life characterized as simple, pure, and authentic. In fact, the “illustrated papers” that

Jenny references helped to situate this idealized landscape in the national imagination. One such magazine in circulation in this part of the twentieth century was *Country Life*: “Founded in 1897 by Edward Hudson, it was an immediate success not so much among the country gentry as among the largely urban middle class [ . . . ] (78), according to Alun Howkins, who points out that one government office had *Country Life* sent to the trenches “as a symbol of what [the British soldier] was fighting for” (78). Howkins indicates that images of the rural English landscape were largely marketed to the people who had no connection to it, the middle class living in the cities and suburbs, which further underscores the fact that images of the landscape were used to mobilize the populace at large. Additionally, the English countryside became so deeply associated with England’s essence that the government and other agencies used images of it to motivate soldiers abroad and remind them what they were laying down their lives for.

The national agenda thus appropriates Landscape and many versions of national propaganda used representations of the English countryside to consolidate the idea of the English character. Garrity says that the inter-war authors she addresses in *Step-Daughters of England* consider an intimate connection with rural England as fundamental to notions of Englishness and, while this rings true in some ways in *The Return of the Soldier*, Jenny eventually learns to endorse a different way to engage with nature by articulating her connection to a landscape that differs from nationalist rhetoric’s use of the pastoral. Instead of valorizing the English landscape of the picture postcards, governmental propaganda posters, and illustrated magazines, she sees the possibility for individual autonomy through an engagement with an un-manicured, wild nature that lives outside the gates of English country houses. For her, the pastoral can function as the site where

an individual can act according to his or her own uncoded desires, outside of the strictures of national imperialism.

The novel underscores how constructed notions of landscape function in imperial nationalism through narrating the relationship between Chris and Margaret. Once Jenny develops positive feelings toward Margaret after visiting her in her shabby home and seeing her as human instead of animal-like, she uses Chris and Margaret to champion her newly-discovered alternative notion of landscape that runs counter to imperial nationalism. Their romance privileges individualism over collectivism and endorses a cross-class relationship that subverts the hierarchy that undergirds the British Empire. Jenny articulates this new mode of engaging with landscape by juxtaposing Chris and Margaret's love affair with natural settings that remain uncultivated and therefore distinct from the manicured grounds featured in the photographs for the illustrated papers that she references in the novel's opening. Jenny describes how Chris and Margaret interact with the natural setting instead of merely observing and fetishizing it as nationalism does. When Jenny recounts both Chris's and Margaret's recollection of their love affair when they were young, she takes care to repeat the lengthy descriptions of the natural environment that they use to introduce the story of their romance to Jenny. They each describe the trees, the animals, and the qualities of the natural surroundings in which their romance began, and their association with the land in this immediate rather than an abstract way implies that the pastoral that serves as a central prong in the nation's identity is inauthentic. Furthermore, the fact that nature acts as the frontispiece for the descriptions of the cross-class romance between Chris and Margaret, which violates national codes of behavior and has ramifications for imperial stability, strengthens

Jenny's endorsement of this alternative affiliation with the pastoral by associating it with a relationship that rejects sanctioned behavior. Descriptions of the well-kept grounds of the estate echo descriptions of Kitty in the text, both characterized as fabricated, whereas that which lies outside national doctrines, like Chris's relationship with Margaret, flourishes in nature untouched by "civilizing" hands and eyes. Jenny's portrayal of Chris and Margaret undermines the position of landscape in British imperial nationalism by serving as a counter-example of the observed landscape that anchors nationalist nostalgia in the early-twentieth century. Jenny thus begins to invoke the pastoral in a subversive way that privileges individual autonomy over the nation.

### **Performance and the Imperial Nation**

Through the course of the text, West begins to characterize Englishness and its imperial virtues as a performance, thus characterizing it as an inauthentic construction. Jenny repeatedly refers to stages and acting, underscoring the characters' outward displays of duty and virtue as performance. In essence, Baldry Court serves as the dramatic venue in which the novel's characters act out their respective roles in the nation. The narrator refers multiple times to the setting as the "stage" and the characters in the story as actors with specific parts, pointing to a gap between the characters' thoughts (the interior) and the personas (the exterior) they present to others. At the novel's end, Jenny recounts the doctor's words as he discusses Chris' condition:

There's a deep self in one, the essential self, that has its wishes. And if those wishes are suppressed by the superficial self—the self that makes, as you say, efforts and usually makes them with the sole idea of putting up a good show before the neighbours—it takes its revenge. Into the house of conduct erected by the superficial self it sends an obsession [. . .] A man who really wants to leave his wife develops a hatred for pickled cabbage which may find vent in performances that lead straight to the asylum [. . .] Mr. Baldry's obsession is that he can't remember the latter years of his life. (79)

The passage reflects emerging psychological theories of the early-twentieth century, which is how most critics engage with the novel's portrayal of Chris' amnesia. But it also points to the fact that the nation provides constructed roles necessary for its survival that it expects its citizens to play. Hearing the doctor's explanation, Jenny laments, "We had been utterly negligent of [Chris'] future, blasphemously careless of the divine essential of his soul" (88). Jenny acknowledges that the difference between what Chris desires and what his role in the nation requires of him has caused the trauma that manifests itself as amnesia.

As Jenny retells the story of Chris and his "illness," she often refers to the characters as actors. She recalls the day of Chris' departure for the war front, remembering that "First he had sat in the morning-room and talked and started on the lawn that already had the desolation of an empty stage although he had not yet gone" (7). During Chris' war-time absence, Jenny and Kitty suffer a sense of purposelessness. Jenny explains that they provided him such a "gracious life" and, "because our performance had



been so brilliantly adequate, how dreary was the empty stage” (8). She recognizes that each member of the household acts according to a script that nobody questions until Chris’ abandonment of it exposes its presence. At the novel’s end, When Margaret pulls him back into the script of the present at the doctor’s request by reminding him of his dead son, Chris returns to the house, the stage, not as Chris but as a soldier, ready to take up his part. As he walks to the house, Kitty asks Jenny, “How does he look?” and Jenny replies, “Every inch a soldier,” indicating that the role is all-encompassing, leaving no room for Chris’ individual desires that lie outside of the nation.

David Cannadine analyzes the way performance works in the execution of national traditions and ceremonies. He argues that how well people perform or how fully they commit to their roles reveals facts about the state of the nation at the time when they perform ritual or ceremony. Chris’ refusal to play his role during his memory loss and the subsequent turmoil indicates that the early-twentieth-century English imperial nation depends upon male commitment to family relationships and to national and imperial interests in order to function. When Chris steps out of his role by virtue of his amnesia, the military sends him home from the war and the household faces probable ruin, indicating that he serves a foundational role in English culture and the preservation of national and imperial goals. Chris’s adult life has been dedicated to serving the national and imperial agenda: he maintains the estate, he goes to work overseas to preserve the family fortune, and he fights in the war when his country needs him, roles he will continue to play after he recovers his memory. Margaret and Jenny also help to support the nation by helping to restore Chris’s memory and thus sending him back to the war

front, returning to the Empire one of its most visible asset at the time, the young male body.

Everybody in the text acts, and Jenny positions herself as an observer of the performances, a subtle but important element of the text that emphasizes how important the element of performance is in this cultural context. Jenny spies through windows and doorways, watching Chris, Kitty, and later Margaret; she says that “From this very window I had spied on [Chris]” (7), and later, “I watched him vigilantly” (32). The residents of Baldry Court also allow themselves to be seen and deliberately put themselves out for public display when they allow the photographers to come to the country house so that it can appear in the illustrated papers (4). Everybody acts their parts because everybody else is looking, ready to point out slippages and keep everyone on track for the good of the nation.

### **Chris and his Imperial Duty**

While many recent postcolonial feminist conversations explore the roles women play in the imperial nation, few critics have explored how constructions of masculinity within the nation affect men in England during this period. West’s novel astutely portrays England’s notions of masculinity and reveals to her audience exactly how they clash with Chris’s desires. In doing so, the text demonstrates how white, upper-middle-class men are also paradoxically hemmed in by a system that requires adherence to expectations about

gender roles that serve the national and imperial interest while subordinating the needs and desires of individuals. The nation uses women's bodies, a topic often addressed in conversations about the nation and the British Empire, and it also uses male bodies, an equally important idea when seeking to understand the dynamics of imperial culture in the early-twentieth century. Jenny's descriptions of Chris as a youth feature him imagining himself beyond the confines of his expected role. He imagines himself as a "Red Indian" in the wild, and "he expected these things with a stronger motion of the imagination than the ordinary child's make-believe" (7-8). West points out that these musings do not typify youthful fantasy; instead, they reveal unique longings that Chris feels deeply and sincerely. He imagines himself outside the nation, as the Other from another culture, but, instead of acting on his impulses, duty compels him to be head of the family enterprise and also a soldier.

Now grown and entrenched in his life's business, Chris experiences the inertia of this system that keeps him pinned. Jenny notes that Kitty's expenditures and the accumulation of material goods in the household leave him unable to imagine the life he really wants for himself. Jenny notes that material goods fill his life and leave him no room for a personal evolution, saying "Literally there wasn't room to swing a revelation in his crowded life" (8). Jenny expresses sympathy with Chris's predicament, but she offers no sympathy for Kitty's position as a woman in English culture who helps maintain the status quo; Jenny sees Chris as the one who suffers from having to take on an expected role, the role of the upper-middle-class husband. He might rank higher on the social ladder than his female counterparts, but he feels no joy, only grief that his life has not been of his own choosing. Jenny's observations reveal not only that women act as

agents of imperial nationalism by supporting the status quo at home but also that men face gender-specific expectations that serve the national imperial agenda.

West's novel further highlights Chris's disjuncture with traditional male gender roles by foregrounding his attraction to Margaret. Chris prefers the thistle to the English rose. For example, Jenny points out that Chris pays no attention to the flowers set about the manor house, yet he adores the flowers Margaret brings: "There was nothing to say when he did not seem to see our flowers, yet kept till they rotted on the stalk the daffodils which Margaret brought from the garden that looked like an allotment" (61). Similarly, in Chris's cousin's letter to Jenny to inform her of Chris's situation in the hospital abroad, he tells her that Chris has asked if the daffodils are out yet (19). It is not roses he is interested in but daffodils, just as it is not Kitty he wants but Margaret.

### **Jenny's Ambiguity as Imperial Conditioning**

While initially expressing revulsion to Margaret, Jenny develops admiration for her by the novel's end, signaling the possibility for transcending cultural and class barriers. Jenny's perspective changes because of her interaction with Margaret, despite her initial refusal to see Margaret as an integral person with value aside from what she produces through labor. Jenny eventually softens to Margaret and becomes her ally after spending some time in Margaret's house, signaling her arrival at a new belief in the transformative power of the genuine romantic relationship between Chris and Margaret

(as opposed to one like Chris' and Kitty's that merely serves to validate the national imperialist agenda). Significantly, Margaret named her home "Mariposa," which she says means "Butterfly" in Spanish, notable because Margaret undergoes a metamorphosis in Jenny's mind, changing from a repulsive creature akin to a dumb ox or an insect into a person Jenny learns to see as beautiful as a result of her new, fuller understanding of the social and political setting in which they live. One of the few details about Margaret's home that Jenny mentions are "the views of Tintern Abbey" framed and hanging on the walls. Immediately after referencing them, Jenny refers to Margaret's "inalienable dignity of a requited love" (45), indicating that she now sees Margaret in a way that differs heavily from the way she did previously. In fact, she now urges Margaret to come visit Chris, saying, "You'll do him good!" (46). The symbol of Tintern Abbey and its Romantic connection to the pastoral triggers Jenny's new perspective:

I could not talk about Kitty. She appeared to me at that moment a faceless figure with flounces, just as most of the servants at Baldry Court appear to me as faceless figures with caps and aprons. There were only two real people in the world, Chris and this woman whose personality was sounding through her squalor like a beautiful voice singing in a darkened room [. . .] (46-7)

Once she finally sees Margaret as human, Jenny discredits Kitty's privileged position. Suddenly, Jenny regards Kitty as no more significant than the servants, all performing their respective roles in the English manor house, wearing their respective costumes, whether those are expensive gowns and jewels or caps and aprons. As an actress, Kitty is faceless and unreal, signified only by her flounces, and for Jenny, now only Chris and

Margaret have import. Margaret, with her red, seamed hands, is now beautiful in Jenny's eyes because of her authenticity. The prints of Tintern Abbey merge with Jenny's notion that an authentic relationship with the pastoral is the only way to achieve individual autonomy. The pastoral is the only site in which Jenny sees no artifice, no performance. While sitting outside among the flowering trees, she says, "I wished I had someone with me to enjoy this artless little show of the new year" (63). The trees are artless, unlike everything else inside Baldry Court, but just like Chris and Margaret.

From that point onward, Jenny sees through the artifice of Baldry Court's grandeur. When Margaret arrives at the estate in the car to see Chris, she comments on the size of the place and says she pities poor Chris for having to work so hard to keep it up. "The pity of this woman was like a flaming sword," Jenny says:

No one had ever before pitied Chris for the magnificence of Baldry Court. It had been our pretence that by wearing costly clothes and organizing a costly life we had been the servants of his desire. But she revealed the truth that although he did indeed desire a magnificent house, it was a house not built with hands. (56)

Margaret topples Jenny's understanding of wealth and privilege by pointing out the labor behind displays of expenditure. Margaret immediately understands that Chris, as the male head of the household, has to work in order to ensure that the funds for maintaining Baldry Court flow amply. She sympathizes with him because of this, thus exceeding Jenny's understanding of Chris. Up to this point, Jenny's expressed purpose in life has been to provide Chris with a life of comfort and ease and to support him emotionally, but Margaret trumps her with her poignant observation. When Jenny, reeling from what

Margaret's comment reveals, admits that the point has merit and Margaret speaks correctly, she also admits that Chris's magnificent house "was a house not built with hands." This enigmatic comment, made even more significant because it ends her description of that revelatory moment, is brief but contains a key to understanding how English gender roles operate in this period. The house was not built with hands, but rather with illusion and artifice, with performance and displays of goods, all of which propagate the national imperial project and support the gender roles within it. Previously, Jenny points out with pride the quality and beauty of the expensive things that surround her in Chris's home. In the beginning of the text, Jenny says, "Even now, when spending seemed a little disgraceful, I could think of that beauty with nothing but pride. I was sure that we were preserved from the reproach of luxury because we had made such a fine place for Chris [. . .]" (6). Jenny describes the beautiful furnishings and decorations that she and Kitty purchased for the house, always justifying their expense because they make a suitable home for Chris. After her encounter with Margaret, however, she regards those same luxuries with a sourness derived from her awareness of the true cost of those creature comforts. Similarly, the chintz in the house becomes "vulgar" to Jenny because the cultural, political, and economic strictures it represents are the very same ones that impede the romance between Chris and Margaret, a romance Jenny has come to envy and champion. In this historical moment, Jenny understands the personal hardships wrought by the nation and empire that exact their price through expectations of behavior and enforcement of gender roles and social boundaries. Her rejection of representations of the English country house mark her objection to the status quo while her now vehement

support for Margaret and Chris indicate that she now thinks subversively, in favor of that which could potentially overturn the governing social and political structures.

Jenny's unwillingness to abandon her sense of revulsion entirely shows how deeply-rooted imperial ideology is and makes up another central component of West's critique of imperialism. Even after Jenny's revelatory moment in Margaret's home, she still winces at her appearance: "But that she was wise, that the angels would of a certainty be on her side, did not make her any the less physically offensive to our atmosphere." She continues to lament that "her opaque skin and her suffering were offensive" (56). Jenny never resolves her ambivalence. She praises Margaret often and admires the depth and beauty of her soul, but, once she realizes that she envies Margaret painfully, she veers toward primitivism again, saying, "She was not so much a person as an implication of dreary poverty, like an open door in a mean house that lets out the smell of cooking cabbage and the screams of children" (68). When Jenny visits Margaret's home and sees the images of Tintern Abbey and begins to regard Margaret as human, she then begins to see through the various constructions that govern her life at Baldry Court. In the above passage, however, Jenny stops seeing Margaret as a person and objectifies her once again. The catalyst for the reversal rests with Jenny's love for Chris. She says, "I was stunned with jealousy" and she realigns herself with Kitty, saying "Nothing could mitigate the harshness of our rejection" (64) and "it was our peculiar shame that he had rejected us" (65). By saying "our" and "us," Jenny re-affiliates herself with Kitty. Jenny sometimes sees Margaret as human, but her heterosexual desire jettisons her back into her previous mindset, firmly entrenched in her endorsement of national imperial normalcy. Jenny wavers several times in this manner.



Jenny's ambiguous feelings toward Margaret come to a climax at the novel's end. However unappealing Margaret remains to her, Jenny kisses her in a manner, as she says, "not as women, but as lovers do" (88). By expressing herself this way, Jenny drops the mask of her performance of Englishness and undermines one of the central codes of imperial behavior. Wachman describes the importance of maintaining codes of imperial behavior, noting that

It was not only abroad, however, and not only among men that the mask and the silence were obligatory. The British in Britain were also educated—by schools, newspapers, museums, music halls, and huge exhibitions and spectacles of "primitive" cultures [. . .]—into a sense of racial and national superiority that was essential to the maintenance of both the empire and the class system. Imperialist capitalism relied on rigid codes of expression and behavior as well as abroad. (8)

Jenny casts aside the rigid code of expression and behavior that she had supported diligently until her interaction with Margaret, both at Margaret's house and later in the manor house, leads her view Margaret as human instead of as an animal. At that point, she expresses that part of her no longer wishes to collude with the national imperialism and the English system and, at that moment, she refuses to maintain the boundary between herself and the Other. By kissing Margaret, Jenny also takes aim at another component of English culture, namely that of heterosexuality. Jenny crosses class boundaries and well as boundaries of sanctioned sexuality, firmly indicating her departure from conventional codes of behavior and national beliefs. Philippa Levine

regards ambivalence as a common feature of imperialism, arguing that colonists sometime exhibit a fascination with

women who differed so palpably from the representations (if not always the reality) of British womanhood. This ambivalence often paired desire and disgust: descriptions of colonized women frequently veer between enthusiasm for their beauty and sexual freedoms and horror at their ugliness and promiscuity. (152)

Jenny replicates this imperial tendency, vacillating between desire and disgust, never fully letting go of her repulsion to Margaret's physical appearance, but recognizing that Margaret having had love, unlike herself, gives her a dignity, an "inalienable dignity of a requited love" (45), a validation that Jenny feels she does not have in a nation that values same-class, heterosexual relationships. Jenny's most profound narrative moments come when she expresses her own sexual desires and reveals that, as a woman who has had love, Margaret has validation in a sexual, heteronormative way that she does not. Jenny then transfers her sexual energy to Chris and Margaret as a couple and also to Margaret herself, kissing her "as lovers do" just before going downstairs to restore Chris's memory (88). Just as Jenny values landscape as the site of individual authenticity and autonomy instead of as a repository of national values, Jenny also learns to value romantic relationships as a way to transcend social division instead of as a means to propagate the sanctioned, patriarchal, nuclear family upon which the nation relies. But the vision is ultimately short-lived.

Jenny and Margaret decide in the same moment that they must cure Chris, both indicating that "truth" and normalcy matter more than his relationship with Margaret.

About the decision, Jenny says, “I know that one must know the truth” (87) and, “Well, that is the kind of thing one has to do in this life” (83). She indicates the inevitability of her and Margaret’s capitulation when she says, “of course it had to be” (85). Jenny continues to indicate that sanctioned normalcy wins over subversion, saying that, if they were to let Chris to continue to live without his memory, “He who was as a flag flying from our tower would become a queer-shaped patch of eccentricity on the countryside, the stately music of his being would become a witless piping in the bushes. He would not be quite a man” (88). Prevailing notions of masculinity and normalcy win over disruptive individualism. When Margaret decides to do the job herself, Jenny observes that “the rebellion had gone from her eyes” (88). To let Chris continue to live without his memory, the tie that binds him to the imperial nation and his roles within it, would signify an act of rebellion, one that neither Jenny nor Margaret can fully enact. Only the reminder of his deceased child stands between Chris and his memory, between Chris and the life he wants to have with Margaret and the life as a British soldier and Kitty’s husband. Restoring his memory requires no grand efforts, whereas upholding the rebellion would have a price. Jenny decides that to let Chris live without his memory would diminish his masculinity, and she references “our tower,” saying that they need him to recover his memory so that their castle retains its glory, so that they exist as more than the “eccentricity” in the countryside they would be otherwise. With normalcy restored, the manor house remains culturally, politically, and economically significant and Chris retains his masculinity. Jenny, while part of her wishes for a different outcome, cannot undermine the prevailing structures in the end.

Through her initial resistance to returning to the normalcy that the return of Chris's memory provides, Jenny stages a personal rebellion against the imperative of class structures, traditional gender roles, and imperial attitudes. Because she continues to feel the colonial revulsion to the Other, Margaret, she demonstrates how powerfully-constructed notions of race, gender, and class are. Jenny learns to champion the cross-class union between Chris and Margaret because of its authenticity, and she expresses sexual desire that transcends normal heterosexual confines, further challenging the strictures of her nation. But the challenge dies shortly after its inception, and Jenny allows normalcy to take its place. Jenny will return to her life as a spinster, on the outside looking in, performing her own limited role in her culture.

## CONCLUSION

In *The Return of the Soldier*, West exposes the wheels and cogs of the machine that is the English nation and its indelible connection to the British Empire as the novel recounts Chris Baldry's experience with amnesia acquired during World War I. Through the course of the narrative, West underscores and then undermines key components of modern national and imperial ideology, including rigid notions of traditional gender roles and sexuality and the primitivist mindset fuels expansionist imperial thinking. Through an encounter with the imperial Other, Jenny experiences a redemptive revelation, saying that Margaret "was the sober thread whose interweaving with our scattered

magnificences had somehow achieved the design that otherwise would not appear” (71). Margaret is the lens through which Jenny sees the structures of imperial nationalism that define their lives in the manor house, even though Jenny continues to see through her own primitivist mindset. At the end of the novel, West leaves her characters firmly entrenched in their affiliations with the nation and Empire, casting regretful glances at the lives they had glimpsed beyond the stronghold of their present ones. Thus, West indicates that the structures of imperial nationalism are inescapable.

The restoration of Chris’s memory realigns him with the imperial agenda and the immediate material manifestation of that is his imminent return to the war front. Benedict Anderson posits that people form nations around a collective memory of past events, an idea that becomes meaningful in relation to Jenny as a narrator. Jenny negotiates her affiliation with the nation by appropriating memory in the text. Perhaps this is her “peculiar use” she mentions in the text. West creates a narrator who wrests control of memory and voice and in doing so becomes more powerful than what her position as an unmarried, childless, upper-middle class woman would have normally allowed. Disrupting accepted notions of “civilized” and thus disrupting a central tenet of imperial nationalism in which the dominant culture imposes its values on those under its domain, Jenny momentarily endorses Margaret, and by implication the colonial Other, challenging the imperial relationship between the center and the periphery. Jenny exchanges her affiliation with the nation and empire for an affiliation with Chris and Margaret’s relationship, even if temporarily, and by doing so she validates a cross-class union that provides her a new way of seeing beyond the expense of imperial stability. In sum, for a

short while Jenny ceases to maintain the racist, class-bound, national imperialist viewpoint upon which the Empire sits.

Jenny's narrative also complicates ideas of the center and the periphery, thus refuting the idea that the metropole affects the periphery while it remains unaffected. Said argues that, according to imperialist ideology, natives in the colonies have no life, history, or culture worth representing without the West (xix). Margaret is the Other in Jenny's narrative, and Baldry Court is the metropole. Because Margaret's story is represented in text, Margaret manages to inform the metropole, thus altering Jenny's understanding of history and place. The presence of the colonial other defines gender roles in imperial England, but also acts as an agent of social change as represented by Jenny's critique of the imperial nation. Jenny demonstrates that her encounter with the Other's narrative does inform her own story, and that the Other's story is well worth representing. Margaret and Jenny's reinstatement of normalcy, however, indicates that the status quo remains more powerful than Jenny's vision beyond imperial boundaries.

# Chapter Three

## Sexuality, Landscape, and English National Imperialism in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*

### INTRODUCTION

*Is it true that you can poke the fire with a stick of dynamite in perfect safety? [. . .] Anyhow, even if it isn't true of dynamite, it's true of women. But they know they are dynamite, and long for the concussion that may justify them.*

--Laura Willowes

Sylvia Townsend Warner, as well-received as she was while she lived, fell into a period of obscurity in the second half of the twentieth century. Some critics attribute her disappearance during these decades to the fact that she wrote in diverse styles within diverse genres, which makes her difficult to categorize and easy to dismiss as not belonging to the modernist period in terms of style and subject matter. In the past several years, critics have recovered her work and begun to offer useful frameworks for understanding her value as a writer. Her oeuvre features a variety of settings and centuries and themes, but Warner's friend Arnold Rattenburg argues that "Sylvia is deeply concerned with her own times, is only and always political, and that is why

whatever the ostensible period, setting and concerns may seem to be, [. . .] the actuality is *now*” (qtd. in Wachman 49). Similarly, Jane Marcus notes that Warner “set all the forms at her disposal dancing to the tune of politics” (*The Gender of Modernism* 533). Warner *is* always political. Almost all of Warner’s texts critique the dominant culture in England in the first part of the twentieth century, and her viewpoints that manifest themselves in her writing are well worth examining today because of their contributions to current academic conversations that investigate the intersections of gender, nation, and empire.

Warner’s first two novels, *Lolly Willowes* (1926) and *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* (1927), present a critique of the British imperial nation and point to possibilities for creating an individual identity within that nation in new and unconventional ways. *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot*, although smaller in both size and scope, serves as addendum to the former and deserves attention given that it addresses in a different way key issues of imperialism, nation, and sexuality. Because *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* is less complex and less comprehensive than *Lolly Willowes*, I treat it as a small supplement to the latter in this chapter. Both of these novels’ protagonists, Laura Willowes and the Reverend Timothy Fortune, learn to live outside of the culture that indoctrinates them, thus pointing to new possibilities of identification with the nation that leave them free to “realize themselves.”<sup>10</sup> The endings of these two books, however, differ vastly. The reader leaves Laura asleep outside, knowing that she will end her days as she is at that moment – happy in her new life. The last page of Fortune’s narrative ends with a sense of futility and undercurrents of profound despair; not only does the Reverend return to the fold of the

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony Smith claims that “human beings must identify with a nation if they want to be free and realize themselves” (74), and Warner provides alternative possibilities for identification with the nation in order to validate her characters in the context of Englishness.



culture from which Laura removes herself, but some of the last lines in the text allude to the destruction of a race of people that happens under the guise of spreading Christianity and English values. The secretary of Fortune's mission tells him about the Great War and how "the Germans crucified Belgian children" (262). As Fanua, the island Fortune resides on and finally leaves, becomes smaller on the horizon, so, too, does the possibility of living in harmony with people of other races. Despite the lack of hope in this particular novel's ending, Warner's texts all contain hopefulness because they present alternative modes of affiliation with the nation that privilege individualism instead of stifling cultural expectations; in other words, the novels envision a cultural space for citizens who have ideas that run counter to the national imperative.

In addition to carving out new space for her characters, *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* provide a register of Warner's leftist political viewpoints that do not become more focused in her texts until the 30's, after she joined the Communist Party and actively opposed Fascism during the Spanish Civil War. The novels *Summer Will Show* (1936) and *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938) clearly present her communist ideas, and critics focus on these later novels when they discuss Warner and her relationship to history. In 1979, Lawrence Mitchell claims that, "by and large, [Warner's 1920's novels] ignore history; instead the focus is very much upon the individual and the survival of the individual in an oppressive society" (55). This early summation overlooks the deeply nuanced political and cultural critique present in both *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, but in recent years critics have begun to see them as a register of much more than imaginative fancy. In her 1996 essay, Elizabeth Maslen asks if *Lolly Willowes* engages with history, "allowing us to 'share in the transformation of a woman's

consciousness,” and answers, “Yes, it does engage with history, as the world Lorna [sic] inhabits for half the book is a well-documented, recognizable middle-class home of the early part of the century, with Lorna playing a traditional role” (198). Maslen mentions *Lolly Willowes* only briefly in her essay, however, on her way to discussing Warner’s later novels and their engagement with history. Her cursory evaluation typifies critical responses to both *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* (which has received far less attention than *Lolly Willowes*). In 2000, John Lucas writes that “Townsend Warner’s decision to join the communist party in the early 1930’s does not present a new departure, still less a change of heart. If we read *Lolly Willowes* aright it becomes difficult to imagine that she could have done anything else” (209). Lucas and others critics writing in the last decade have thus begun to recognize the political and cultural critiques manifest in *Lolly Willowes* (more so than *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot*, about which critical material remains scant). My contention is that read closely, both *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* do not present a straight Marxist critique but a critique nonetheless of the twentieth-century British imperial economy and the English class system. Warner privileges matters of sexuality and domesticity in her materialist critique.

Furthermore, these two texts provide deep insight into the workings of both the English nation and the British Empire during Warner’s era and therefore have value for postcolonial scholarship. In *Lolly Willowes*, Warner addresses the vast and varied ways that the national agenda and the imperial mission align with constructions of gender and class in England during this time period and directly affect the trajectory of Laura’s life. The novel examines the role socialization plays and depicts the various institutions responsible for molding England’s females into proper English women, namely

patriarchy, Christianity, and literature. In addition, the text explores the ways in which class and gender in England intersect through nuanced depictions of material wealth and domestic labor, further demonstrating the ways in which Laura's gender and social hierarchies that rely on class division define and limit her. By incorporating numerous references to the British Empire, Warner's novel exposes the connection between the upper-middle-class English family and the imperial economy, implicating the Empire's economic system in Laura's lack of freedom. For Laura, freedom from this web of determinants comes by casting off her social obligations and finding a new path, one she creates entirely for herself by rejecting expectations and preconceived notions put forth by her nation.

Warner exercises similar tactics in *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, but focuses on the primitivist viewpoint that underpins the assumption that natives in the colonies, to borrow Said's phrase, "have no life, history, or culture to speak of, no independence or integrity worth representing without the West. And when there is something to be described it is [. . .] unutterably corrupt, degenerate, irredeemable" (xix). By doing so, *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* refutes the contemporary assumption that the metropole informs the periphery while it remains unaffected. Warner shatters the notion that the dominant culture remains immune by depicting an English missionary who learns to embrace the philosophies, religion, and lifestyle of those he set out to convert to Christianity and, perhaps more importantly, indoctrinate into English ways. Mr. Fortune, who has been converted by his "flock," decides to leave the islanders to themselves, thus rejecting Christian imperialism.

When read side by side, *Laura Willowes* and *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* serve as a register of experience in the English imperial nation in the early twentieth century. The

common thread between both characters' experiences lies in their eventual realization that the needs of the nation and the practices of imperialism impose upon them expectations of heterosexuality and conformity to the nation's agenda while relying on the bodies of colonial natives who have traditionally been seen only through a primitivist lens. Each character finds a way out by leaving behind a community in search of a new one, but only one of them ultimately finds sanctuary, freedom, and contentment.

## I

### *LOLLY WILLOWES*

#### **Everything's to Blame: Socialization and Gender**

*Lolly Willowes* is divided into three chapters; the first chronicles Laura's life among her family in their country manor house, from birth to her early womanhood. These first years provide Laura happiness and independence since her mother does not trouble herself to mold Laura into a proper lady with skirts of appropriate length and leaves her free to read the books she chooses, books other mothers deem unseemly for a young woman. Laura, feeling no pressure from her parents to find a husband or participate in pastimes typically associated with girls her age, pursues her own interests, which include wandering the woods and meadows in search of herbs and plants with

which she can make teas and brews, a skill she learns from the household maid. Once her parents are both deceased, Laura, an unmarried woman with no claim to the family estate, must move to her brother's London residence where she assists in rearing her nieces and tending to the home, tasks she completes with moderate skill and that provide her meager satisfaction.

The novel's second section follows the 47 year-old Laura as she faces resistance to her plan to leave her brother Henry's home and live independently, out from under the burdens of caring for others. She wrests free from her domineering brother and the duties of his household and stakes a claim to freedom, settling into a cottage in the secluded village of Great Mop where she freely wanders alone in the woods and lives according to the rhythms of her own wishes. Crippled financially by Henry's poor investments with her income, Laura takes modest rooms in a local cottage where she befriends Mrs. Leak, the cottage owner, who teaches her about the village and its denizens, an eclectic and eccentric group, most of whom meet up at the witches' covens in the woods at night. In this unconventional community, Laura finds the space and freedom to make her own decisions about how, where, and with whom to spend her days.

The final section shows how Laura defends her freedom from her new community and her family. The Great Mop community allows more sexual freedom than London (homosexual relationships are semi-public and sanctioned), more economic freedom (a man is free to make a living as a henwife, for example), and generally ignores the governing social rules of the rest of England. Despite their acceptance, however, Laura chooses to remain apart from them. When the characters in Great Mop gently push her into joining their ranks, she chooses to remain an outsider, even though the

community differs from the society she left behind and accepts her eccentricities. Laura also quietly fights against her nephew Titus when he moves to Great Mop and forces her back into the role of Aunt Lolly. Titus, whom Laura resents for his overbearing and possessive attitude to the Great Mop landscape she has grown to love and with which she feels communion, represents the controlling patriarchal structures from which Laura has just escaped. Anxious to secure her liberty and independence once and for all, Laura accepts assistance from Satan, in the form of magic, who drives Titus away and leaves Laura in peace, a solitary, fully-contented, autonomous figure. Taken as a whole, the novel charts, with extraordinary detail, the multiple ways in which Laura experiences the English nation in each phase of her life and how the nation exerts itself as she navigates her way through it on her way to her own unique lifestyle, exercising her autonomy and sloughing off Christianity, traditional gender roles, and other expectations furnished her by the English nation and British Empire. Her last remaining affiliation rests with the landscape, but even this relationship undermines English national tradition.

The overarching vision in the novel recognizes the integration of different aspects of society that together comprise the English nation and how they influence Laura in different phases of her life as they work in concert to socialize her. In *National Identity*, Smith argues that socialization takes place “through compulsory, standardized, public mass education systems, through which state authorities hope to inculcate national devotion and a distinctive, homogeneous culture [. . .]” Through the use of national symbols, such as monuments, flags, and ceremonies, he continues, “members are reminded of their common heritage and cultural kinship and feel strengthened and exalted by their sense of common identity and belonging” (16-17). As *Lolly Willowes* shows,

however, these symbols, monuments, ceremonies, etc. do more than foster a sense of belonging; they also create a culture of conformity so that all citizens work together to ensure the nation's health and longevity. Warner demonstrates this towards the end of the second chapter, through a general reference to the interconnections between all social institutions and their role in Laura's subjection:

If [Laura] were to start forgiving she must needs forgive Society, the Law, the Church, the History of Europe, the Old Testament, great-great-Aunt Salome and her prayer book, the Bank of England, Prostitution, the Architect of Apsley Terrace, and half a dozen useful props of civilization.  
(136)

By capitalizing the first letter of words like "Law," "Bank," "Prostitution," "History," and "Society," Warner seems to be calling attention to the constructed nature of these social institutions—instead of natural phenomena, they are formalized and patented constructions that clearly serve the dominant group. The list above anticipates Anthony Smith's list of the elements of a nation and thus highlights Warner's concern with how the English nation functions in Laura's life and her acuity for understanding the complexity of that function and its infiltration into daily life where it appears naturalized, even in something as small as great-great-aunt Salome's prayer book. The text describes Aunt Salome as "a loyal subject, a devout churchwoman, and a good housewife," thus aligning nationalism, religion, and domesticity. Smith postulates that the language of nationalism manifests itself in "hidden aspects" like forms of etiquette, legal procedures, and architecture, to name only a few (*National Identity* 77), and Warner's narrator

anticipates the list when she names things like society, the law, and the architect of Apsley Terrace as “useful props of civilization” (English civilization, more specifically).

The above passage about “Society, the Law, the Church” acts as the key with which to interpret the narrative and using it as such allows readers to understand that *Lolly Willowes* engages in criticism of the nation. Indeed, the narrator begins delimiting how institutions such as society, the law, and the church function in the novel immediately, in the first pages. Consider the novel’s opening sentence: “When her father died, Laura Willowes went to live in London with her elder brother and his family” (5). Before divulging the first detail about Laura’s character, the novel’s setting, or anything else, the narrator tells the reader that Laura’s movement in the world depends upon men—her father dies and so her brother takes over her care and moves her to his London home. Economically, socially, and geographically, Laura’s position in this novel depends on patriarchy, as she well recognizes. As the narrator adds, “And Laura, feeling rather as if she were a piece of property forgotten in the will, was ready to be disposed of as they should think best” (10). Because she is unmarried, the move to her brother’s home is the only viable option for Laura, according to her family, despite the fact that it makes her feel powerless and objectified.

Patriarchal authority controls Laura’s physical movement for the next decades of her life, as well. When an older Laura expresses her wish to retire to the Chilterns, alone, in order to do the kinds of things she would like, she meets stoic resistance from her brother and his wife: “Henry was like a wall, and Caroline’s breasts were like towers” (77).<sup>11</sup> Henry flatly forbids “Lolly” to leave his house, calls her “mad,” and reminds her

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<sup>11</sup> The fact that Warner uses this reference to Caroline’s female body in this passage seems particularly interesting since her breasts, along with the wall that is Henry, are the objects that stand in Laura’s path to



of her position as an unmarried woman (94-95). Henry's refusal to allow Laura to leave his home stems from his notion that unmarried women must remain under male guardianship. Laura remains subject to patriarchal control as a resident of her brother's home, a control endorsed by his wife, Caroline, who steadfastly supports Henry in his role as head of the household. The text reveals that patriarchy depends upon the indoctrination of both men and women in order to be naturalized into cultural practice, as evidenced by Caroline's stalwart principles and the way they uphold Henry's desire to retain Laura in their home, under his watch. The men in England during this period have dominion and women like Caroline support the system by supporting their husbands.

Caroline's notions about domestic order are another means by which she supports Henry's dominion over the household and the narrator takes care to position Christianity and the Bible at the center of Caroline's principles, thus demonstrating one way that the Church functions as another one of the "dozen useful props of civilization." The narrator describes Caroline specifically as "a religious woman" and juxtaposes that description with the observation that "In her house-keeping and her scrupulous account-books she expressed an almost mystical sense of the validity of small things" (48). When Laura comments on Caroline's beautifully-arranged underclothes in the wardrobe, Caroline replies, "We have our example [. . .] The grave clothes were folded in the tomb" (48). Caroline's pristine home and orderly account books symbolize the same religious principles with which she approaches her marriage. After describing the linens arranged like Christ's grave clothes, the narrator describes Caroline's deferential attitude toward

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freedom. This, alongside the other passages that demonstrate Caroline's collusion with national hegemony point to Warner's acute awareness that many aspects of culture work invisibly because they are so deeply internalized by men and women alike. Laura is the only character in the novel who seems aware of the unseen ideology.

her husband, remarking that “she yielded to Henry’s judgment in every dispute, she bowed her good sense to his will and blinkered her wider views in obedience to his prejudices” (51). Christianity in this Willowes home manifests itself in domestic order as well as in Caroline’s unwavering obedience to her spouse. This model of the Christian home and the nuclear family forms the bedrock of English nationalism because it provides the justification for men to run the country. In fact, Mrinalini Sinha argues that “the family—constructed as ‘natural,’ heterosexual, and patriarchal—crucially services how the nation is constituted” (187). Masters at home because the Bible depicts it that way, men then take mastery masters in political affairs. In effect, Caroline’s adherence to the Christian model of the patriarchal home supports the English nation and the British Empire by first supporting her husband’s role as king of their residence.

*Lolly Willowes* also demonstrates how society serves as handmaiden to patriarchy and religion by indoctrinating the uninitiated and enforcing the ‘rules’ through socialization. The community of women who live near Lady Place during Laura’s youth express concern that Laura lacks adequate interaction with other girls. They believe “She should have the companionship of girls her own age, or she might grow up eccentric” (19). Laura’s birth left her mother “invalidish” (18) and Mrs. Willowes avoided her responsibilities in regard to Laura’s upbringing. The other mothers in the community tried to “open the poor lady’s eyes” and direct her attention to matters of Laura’s socialization, to no avail (19). The community’s concern for Laura’s indoctrination underscores the stigma of being different and hints at the subsequent difficulty of making a suitable marriage, the ultimate goal of the performance of womanhood in the text.

Furthering the point, the narrator describes Laura's nieces, Fancy and Marion, as replete with appropriate social interaction:

They were dull children, though their dullness did not prevent them from having a penetrating flow of conversation. Their ways and thoughts were governed by a sort of zodiacal procession of other little girls, and when they came down to the drawing-room after tea it seemed to Laura that they brought the Wardours, or the Wilkinsons, or the de la Bottes with them.

(46)

Laura's normalcy depends upon her socialization, her making friends with the girls in her community like Fancy and Marion do, engaging in the same activities, dressing like them and, in short, performing her role as a woman. In the novel, socialization entails the process of learning the performance of womanhood, with its accepted dress, its manner of speaking, and its sanctioned activities, of which reading is not included since ideas that are not tacitly approved by the greater body of English mothers could lead a young girl astray. Laura's nieces, Fancy and Marion, provide an example of properly-socialized girls, and the fact that Laura finds them dull is another indication of her desire to escape from the tract she has been pushed into all of her life.

Up until her move to Great Mop, Laura experiences pressure to conform socially, so she feels surprise when she discovers the community's lack of coherence with the terms of social behavior she previously experienced:

Great Mop [was not] a sociable village, at any rate, compared with the villages which Laura had known as a girl. Never had she seen so little dropping in, leaning over fences, dawdling in the shop or in the

churchyard. Little laughter came from the taproom of the Lamb and Flag. Once or twice she glanced in at the window as she passed by and saw the men within sitting silent and abstracted with their mugs before them. Even the bell-ringers when they had finished their practice broke up with scant adieus, and went silently on their way. (115)

The Great Mop villagers do not socialize, which means, at least in part, that they do not police one another either, as Laura has previously been policed by those who wished her to be 'normal.' The social interaction between peers that is important to Laura's mother and that well-socialized girls like Fancy and Marion take pleasure in is conspicuously absent in Great Mop. Indoctrination into the nation depends on proper socialization and Great Mop, a community of witches, operates independently of the social customs and expectations Laura experienced in her other communities. By focusing on socialization as a means of curtailing aberrant behavior and facilitating an individual's indoctrination into the nation, Warner highlights the connection between traditional gender roles in England and casual social interaction that acts as a primary vehicle for their transmission and sustenance.

### **The Economics of Subjection: Economy and Class**

Warner dovetails her critique of traditional, patriarchal, national culture with her equally sharp and detailed critique of the English economy in the early part of the

twentieth century. With elaborate details embedded in the narrative, Warner demonstrates Laura's commodification. Laura's experience of feeling like a possession connects with Warner's critique of Laura's father's accumulation of possessions as symptomatic of the British patriarchy in which the family participates. Indeed, the narrator's attention to economic detail and the accumulation of material wealth that surrounds the Willowes family announces Warner's critique of the English imperial economy and spotlights Laura's relationship to the English class system, the gender system, and her family's material wealth, showing great contradictions between the privileges accorded to her by each of those things.

The novel conflates English patriarchy with material goods and services when the narrator describes the family's move from the Dorset countryside to Lady Place<sup>12</sup> in Wales and provides an itemization of the estate's contents: "When grandfather Henry, the masterful man, removed across the border, he was followed by a patriarchal train of manservants and maidservants, mares, geldings, and spaniels, vans full of household stuff [. . .]" (37). The accrual of objects correlates to the accrual of hired help—the manservants and maidservants—that respectively represent and support upper-middle-class patriarchy. The description of the contents of the Willowes' family home provides the reader with an idea of the home when Laura resides in it. Moreover, this description contains another itemization: two of the family's most prized possessions are a stuffed green parakeet (Ratafee, they call him) and a green harp. The narrator couples the

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<sup>12</sup> The name Lady Place was surely not randomly chosen. The home, which represents the patriarchal family, has served as the training ground for generations of ladies, and when Laura was just born, her father bought her "a little string of pearls" that year by year "could be extended until it encircled the neck of a grown-up young woman at her first ball" (15). The necklace, a marker of the femininity that her father fetishizes (he also dreams of seeing her dressed in ermine, and we learn later in the novel that her middle name is Erminia), seems less like jewelry and more like a collar in the narrator's description of it, which becomes an outward marker of the restrictions placed around women.

descriptions of these items so that they seem like a pair; and, when the narrator recalls Laura's ancestors' move from the Dorset home to Lady Place, the narrator provides another joint description that tells the reader how these objects weathered the relocation—some strings snapped, a few tail feathers were dislodged. The bird and the harp, since they are the only items that the narrator points out in the new home, are thus the constants in the domestic setting of the Willowes family and serve as markers of the Willowes' identity.

Not only does Warner use the Willowes family to expose the function of material wealth in the novel but she also uses the family to expose the function of the class system in England in the early twentieth century. Warner's narrator takes care to describe the Willowes family line, whose strongest characteristics is an insistence upon and devotion to tradition, another element of English culture that Warner implicates in confining Laura in the novel. The narrator says of the august group:

[ . . . ] the Willowes were a conservative family and kept to old-fashioned ways. Preference, not prejudice, made them faithful to their past. They slept in beds and sat upon chairs whose comfort insensibly persuaded them into respect for the good sense of their forebears. Finding that well-chosen wood and well-chosen wine improved with keeping, they believed that the same law applied to well-chosen ways. (10)

The accumulation of material goods is matched by an accumulation of values and "well-chosen ways" that members of the Willowes family also pass down, among them a predilection for conservatism and tradition, which explains why Laura initially goes along with her family members' wishes and packs her bags for Apsley Terrace, letting

them “dispose” of her as they think best (10). Accustomed to being moved like the bird and the harp, and understanding that she has no means of her own, Laura shows no resistance. Although a member of the gentry class, being a woman makes Laura property, as indicated by the narrator’s use of the word “dispose.” As such, Laura’s position aligns her in ways to the lower classes, who are also carried along on moves, just like Laura and the mountains of material goods.

The text presents the lower classes as involuntary supporters of the dominant group and, by extension, the nation and empire, an idea solidified when Warner characterizes the servants as possessions. While the text carefully describes Laura’s daily life with her father and subsequently with her brother and his family, it does not reveal the patterns of quotidian life for the upper-middle-class characters exclusively. By also providing a glimpse of the activities performed daily by the hired help, the narrator reinforces the idea that the social structure that restricts Laura’s movement also participates in oppressing the lower classes. For example, the text notes that

By the time the Willowes family met at breakfast all [the servants’] activity had disappeared like the tide from the smooth, garnished beach. For the rest of the day it functioned unnoticed. Bells were answered, meals were served, all that appeared was completion. Yet unseen and underground the preparation and demolition of every day went on, like the inward persistent workings of heart and entrails. Sometimes a crash, a banging door, a voice upraised, would rend the veil of impersonality. (44-45)

The quiet rooms in which Laura and her brother's family eat, sleep, and read are supported by the work that happens in the rooms underneath them, work performed by the hired hands who labor to keep the home functioning. The lower classes work in the home "unseen and underground," and yet their work is crucial to the maintenance of the larger economy. Domesticity becomes, for Warner, a site that plainly reveals the English class system through its use of hired labor and its accumulation of material possessions and its simultaneous exclusion of the laborers from view. The work, as important as the work of the heart and the entrails (ugly but essential), remains hidden behind the veil. Warner thus uses domesticity to highlight the position of the lower classes in the national economy.

Warner again aligns Laura with the working class later in the text in the treatment of Laura's household activities. After Laura's father's death, Henry takes Laura to his home where she becomes a useful "wheel" in the "mechanism" that is the household (44). Her nieces, and soon everybody, call her Lolly instead of Laura,<sup>13</sup> and Laura struggles for two decades to fulfill her role within the family as loving Aunt Lolly. She tries to imitate Caroline's efficiency in order to make her presence justified; instead of resting idly as she would like, "Lolly" does needlework alongside her sister-in-law. The narrator says, "Time went faster than the embroidery did. [Laura] had actually a sensation that she was stitching herself into a piece of embroidery with a good deal of background. But, as Caroline said, it was not possible to feel dull when there was so much to do" (43-44). Laura labors in the household just as the servants do, with little leisure time for

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<sup>13</sup> The fact that Laura's name changes as she changes roles is noteworthy. Postcolonial scholars recognize that a central practice in empire building is for colonizers to impose their language on the colonists and to rename things in the colonized culture. Irish playwright Brian Friel explores the power the English wielded when they renamed spots on the Irish landscape using English words in his 1980 play *Translations*.



herself as the tasks at hand dictate her daily schedule. On family vacations to the sea side, Laura longs to explore the woods nearby and collect herbs for her teas and tonics, but the family's needs preclude her absence from them so she leaves her desires unfulfilled. Laura serves the family, the bedrock of the nation, at the expense of her own desires and autonomy and, by depicting her so often at work, the text draws a connection between Laura and the servant class who populate the peripheries. Laura, however, receives no pay in exchange for her labor for the family, an important economic distinction. Laura, by virtue of her duties to the household, supports the national economy just as the paid servants do by helping to maintain the family in material ways, like caring for the children and assisting in the daily household functions. But, because she receives no paycheck, Laura is further handicapped. As a middle-class single woman, the economy relies on Laura to help raise other people's children and keep another person's household running, but she receives no money of her own for the work she performs. The intersection of her gender and her class render her immobile, without money and without freedom.

### **The Empire in the Living Room, The Living Room as Empire**

In the relatively meager body of criticism available on *Lolly Willowes*, a few critics address some ways in which the patriarchal English nation operates in Laura's life, but the majority of critical work on the novel focuses on Warner's use of realism and

fantasy as a literary genre. No critic yet has provided a sustained analysis of the ways in which the Empire is made manifest in the text, which this chapter argues is central to fully understanding Warner's vision that recognizes the interconnectedness between the nation, the Empire, gender, and class in twentieth century England.<sup>14</sup>

When Warner itemizes the contents of the Willowes estate, the contents are important for more than their monetary and sentimental value. The items catalogued have hefty significance because of their relationship with the British Empire and help to illuminate both the household's and Laura's position in the Empire. The presence of imperial relics in the estate foregrounds the position of the Empire in the English domestic setting, and the novel's comparison between Laura and these items highlights her position in the Empire as commodity. When Lady Place is up for rent after Laura's father dies and the belongings put in storage (the estate cannot continue to operate without the patriarch), the bird and the harp are again the only possessions mentioned and both gesture toward England's colonial history. These markers of wealth are also markers of imperialism, the bird as an export from the tropics and the harp as an emblem of Ireland, one of England's first colonies. As such, the bird and the harp do more than represent the family's upper-middle-class status; they also connect the family to the imperial economy that extracts goods from overseas territories. Indeed, Titus, great-great-grandfather to Laura, procured the bird on a "voyage to the Indies" (11). These references to the British Empire, one overt, one implicit, link the Willowes family and its domestic seat to the politics of Empire; and, in conjunction with the role Laura's male

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<sup>14</sup> Jane Garrity provides the fullest critical analysis of *Lolly Willowes* in *Step-Daughters of England*. Garrity examines the ways in which Warner's novel critiques the conjunction of nationalism and imperialism, arguing that the text carves out a place for the lesbian in the imperial nation with the use of homosexualized representations of landscape that invoke Englishness.

relatives play in making her little more than a possession, the first two sections of the novel lay bare the link between the nation, the Empire, and the subaltern position of women in English culture. Laura, privileged as a member of the English who have political and economic dominion over the territories that belong to the Empire and yet subjugated by her gender, is compared to these peripheries of the realm. Her home contains these markers of empire and she comes to understand that she is subject to the same political, economic, and cultural practices that landed Ratafee in the manor's interior. She, too, moves according to the will of those around her and is conditioned to be "ready to be disposed of as they should think best" (10). She, too, serves as both pillar and symbol of the familial and national structures. Without her cooperation and labor, both would collapse.

The link between the Empire and the domestic also surfaces when Laura returns to the house with an arm-full of African lilies purchased at the local florist. When Henry asks where the flowers came from, Caroline answers and Henry says, "Ah!," and "roused the coins in his trousers pocket" (77). The mention of a product from the colonies correlates to the coins in his pocket, and he jingles them cheerfully upon association. The national economy has connections to the Empire and to Laura's limited mobility. Henry tells Laura that, since he has guardianship over her money, he made a speculative investment with it, an investment that failed and has left her with less than half of what she once had: "In 1920 I transferred the greater part of it to the Ethiopian Development Syndicate, a perfectly sound investment which will in time be as good as ever [. . .], Henry says. They will rise again the moment we have a Conservative Government" (96-97). By investing Laura's money in this Ethiopian Syndicate, Henry simultaneously

divests his sister of agency and supports imperialist ideology that seeks to profit from colonial territories. As Garrity notes, “Whenever the text deploys colonial rhetoric it does so in order to illustrate that the price of Empire entails the inevitable suppression of female liberty” (154). Garrity also argues that Henry’s “colonial impulses” demonstrate “a clear linkage between masculine empire-building and the domestication of women” (158). Laura, who also thinks of Henry as “imperious,” manages to gain control over her own life by refusing to abide by Henry’s wishes any longer and stating her intentions to him firmly once she finally forms them. At the age of 47, she eludes further subjection by formulating a plan, reclaiming her ebbing cash flow, and moving to Great Mop. Leaving the material comforts and social status of Apsley Terrace behind, Laura exchanges material welfare for her independence, her money now supporting herself instead of imperial projects like the Ethiopian Syndicate.

Warner’s novel also demonstrates that women support the imperial project, just as Caroline upholds patriarchal structures by supporting her husband’s reign over the household. Laura’s aunt, who makes a brief appearance in the novel, promotes the interests of the nation and the Empire. By including Aunt Emmy, the text points to another site of academic inquiry that has lately come into focus in the work of postcolonial feminist scholars: the notion that women acted as key participants in the imperial project at this time.

Women participated in empire building by traveling abroad as Christian missionaries and by providing domestic help for English men living in the colonies, for example. Middle- and upper-middle-class English women also travelled to the colonies in search of a husband when they could not find one at home. In fact, between 1899 and

1911, more than 200,000 women travelled to the colonies from England for these various purposes (Mukherji xii), and Aunt Emmy encourages Laura to do the same. The reader learns that “When Aunt Emmy came back from India and filled the spare-room with cedar-wood boxes [ . . . ] she exclaimed briskly to Everard: ‘My dear, it’s high time Laura married! Why isn’t she married already? [ . . . ] You must let me give her a season in India’” (27). Laura’s father feels no need to have Laura married, but her aunt does, pointedly. Aunt Emmy proposes a journey to the colonies in order for Laura to find a mate and thus Warner establishes two things: that the colonial peripheries fulfill the needs of the metropole and that women act as agents on behalf of the nation by forging heterosexual unions and on behalf of the Empire by promoting it and by participating economically and ideologically.

In addition to participating in and supporting the Empire in these tangible ways, women in England were also defined through the intersection of nation and empire, as many recent postcolonial feminist critics have argued, and *Lolly Willowes* points to this intersection. Jane Garrity argues that, within the context of waning imperialism, “ideas of *nation* and *empire* were imbricated in one another precisely through tropes of the female reproductive body,” but not just any female body. Garrity carefully points out that the white, upper-middle-class female body was regarded as the integral factor in preserving perceived racial purity and English integrity (2).

Similarly, Barbara Bush notes that eugenicists propagated the idea that women were central to imperial stability and believed that unmarried women were “failing their racial duty to reproduce the white race” (85). In *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists*, Lucy Bland outlines the ways in which single women were a source of

national anxiety in this period, suspect because they might stray outside the bounds of sanctioned behavior as lesbians or because they were thought to be susceptible to mania induced by their lack of sexual outlet. Spinsters were therefore encouraged to act as an ancillary to white, middle-class mothers, helping to mold their children into proper English citizens. Zillah Eisenstein also asserts that nation-building depends upon both gendered *and* racialized images of women's bodies, categories that are constructed vis-à-vis empire. Anne McClintock and Robin Hackett have explored the intimate connection between race and gender (and class), including how cultured English women only exist as a category of identity because they have been set against colonial subjects who serve as a reference point.

In the novel, Aunt Emmy demonstrates how the imperial encounter engenders categories of race and gender in England. When Aunty Emmy tries to interest Laura in spending a "season" in India by telling her about its charms, her description reveals this specific English imperial attitude toward the colonial subjects and territories. Laura listens to Aunt Emmy describe the

compounds and mangoes, the early morning rides along the Kilpawke Road, the grunting song of the porters who carried Mem Sahibs in litters up to the hill-stations, parrots flying through the jungle, ayahs with rubies in their nostrils, kid-gloves preserved in pickle jars with screw-tops—all the solemn and simple pomp of old-fashioned Madras beckoned to her, beckoned like the dark arms tinkling with bangles of soft gold and colored glass. (28-29)

Aunt Emmy identifies India by its laborers, the grunting porters carrying the English on their shoulders, literally and figuratively, and by its ayahs. The synecdoche at the end of the passage makes the point clearer that Emmy disassociates real Indian bodies and real Indian lives from the work they perform within the realm. She sees only “dark arms” and nostrils with rubies, not bodies of real people. The pieces of bodies are lumped in with parrots in the jungle, pickle jars, and mangoes, further characterizing the Indians as objects, objects to be used in service to the English. Furthermore, given that Emmy describes India in order to tempt Laura to visit and secure a husband, the British imperial viewpoint and its inability to see the natives as human, or even as whole bodies, is directly connected to heterosexuality, the English family, and the health of the English nation. By linking Aunt Emmy’s description of India to the task of securing Laura a mate, Warner skillfully lines up the institution of marriage with the English nation and its construction of gender, and shows how they intersect with the Empire. The Empire that relies on native bodies relies on the English nation, which relies on the racialized bodies of English women to create new citizens.

### **Nature, Nation, and Sexuality**

Laura, boxed in by contradictory positions in her culture, manages to find freedom for herself, and she does so by revising traditional heterosexual relationships, by revising traditional narratives, and by revising the traditional English relationship with

nature, all repositories for English national values. By finding alternatives to all the values and the expectations that had previously shackled her, Laura finds her individuality and secures freedom and solitude, the things she yearned for most. Abiding by her family's wishes, Laura previously spends her adult days swept up in the wake of convention and expectation, but early in the novel the narrator shows the reader that she seeks to assert a sense of herself as independent of how she circulates in society. When Caroline (Laura's sister-in-law) plans Laura's move to their home in London, Laura raises no verbal objection despite having a small income of her own. Instead she does something unusual that the reader can interpret in at least two ways. While Caroline processed thoughts of rearranging furniture in order to accommodate Laura in her home,

[ . . . ] Laura was not thinking at all. She had picked a red geranium flower, and was staining her left wrist with the juice of its crushed petals. So, when she was younger, she had stained her pale cheeks, and had bent over the greenhouse tank to see what she looked like. But the greenhouse tank showed only a dark shadowy Laura, very dark and smooth like the lady in the old holy painting that hung in the dining-room and was called the Leonardo. (7)

Lolly enacts a symbolic suicide as she crushes the petals and marks herself with their juice, silently objecting to being passed from house to house like the furnishings, and the narrator, by recounting this detail, emphasizes the hopelessness of her situation. One could also argue that, by staining her wrist red with the flowers, Laura compares her move to her brother's household to death, a death that she accepts as inevitable. The ambiguity of this passage highlights both Laura's objection and acquiescence, an



important narrative tactic that destabilizes traditional notions of the reader/writer relationship. Warner uses ambiguity frequently in the text as a narrative strategy that displaces the traditional reader/writer relationship in which the writer provides the meaning and acts as authority over the text. Blurring the demarcation meshes well with Warner's larger strategy: to unhinge the series of dichotomies that bind her culture together (male/female, civilized/savage, for example). This passage with the geranium flower reveals Laura's discontent with the traditions that insist she move in with Henry and Caroline and become their "inmate" (7). The scene subtly but poignantly depicts her sensed entrapment and the internal discord it causes her, making the freedom she achieves later in life seem that much richer and more rewarding in contrast.

Warner begins to remove Laura from this entrapment by undermining heterosexuality, by removing Laura from the "traffic in women," to borrow Gayle Rubin's phrase, and by depicting alternative sexualities. For centuries, English literature has served as a repository of patriarchal values and has demonstrated how patriarchy works in British culture. In *Between Men* (1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that the hidden subject in traditional English literature has always been male bonding that occurs in a triangulation, with women being the body through which men form homosocial relationships (26). By comparing Warner's work to the vast body of texts that reproduce heterosexual normativity, one can see that Warner's work presents a new trope of sexuality in the English nation. The novel makes clear that the insidious patriarchal systems leave women little choice when navigating sexual relationships. For example, when Titus proposes to Pandora Williams, Laura thinks that "Titus was but a proxy wooer, the ambassador of an imperious dynastic will; and that the real match was made

between Pandora and Lady Place” (202). Women in this period have a social and economic need to make a marriage that will provide for them materially if they are not to end up in Laura’s position as spinster, and Laura thinks that Pandora understands that her match with Lady Place, through Titus, will secure her social and financial stability. The relationship between Titus and Pandora indicates that heterosexual normalcy in England at this time has strong economic and political underpinnings and is not primarily rooted in an essential bond between a man and a woman.

One way Warner disrupts homosocial normativity in the novel is by flirting with lesbianism. The most striking portrayal of lesbian desire in the novel happens at the “Witches’ Sabbath,” when Laura and Emily dance. The narrator describes the moment in detail:

Laura liked dancing with Emily; the pasty-faced and anemic young slattern whom she had seen dawdling about the village danced with a fervor that annihilated every misgiving. They whirled faster and faster, fused together like two suns that whirl and blaze in a single destruction. A strand of the red hair came undone and brushed across Laura’s face. The contact made her tingle from head to foot. She shut her eyes and dived into obliviousness [ . . . ] (175)

The sexually charged language in this passage leaves little doubt that what Laura experiences with Emily, in the darkness, is lesbian desire. Her body tingles all over and she surrenders herself to oblivion in Emily’s arms. Another detail revealed earlier in the novel seems to work in conjunction with this notion. When Mrs. Leak, Laura’s landlady, tells her about the two old sisters who live together in Lazzard Court (is ‘*Lazzard*,’

supposed to sound a little like ‘*lesbian*’?), she describes the house’s bedrooms, telling Laura that, when she worked there, “she had slept in all of them. Nay, she had awakened in the Royal bed, and pulling aside the red damask curtains had looked to the window to see the sun shining upon the tulip tree” (110). It seems more than unusual that a servant should have the opportunity to sleep in all of the “principal bedrooms” in this ancestral mansion, much less closet herself within the curtains of the bed traditionally reserved for royalty. One could solve the riddle by assuming that the young (and then single) Mrs. Leak engaged in an intimate relationship with one of the sisters.<sup>15</sup> While the Great Mop villagers sanction lesbianism, Laura chooses not to engage, and she leaves Emily abruptly, returning to the solitude that awaits her in her rented rooms. Laura seeks freedom from all social expectations and one can argue that she sees homosexuality as yet another formalized sexual trope, albeit an unconventional one, and she chooses her own unique path, yet again. Laura chooses to disengage from sexual relationships with other people altogether, securing her independence absolutely.

Laura’s encounter with the devil also has lesbian overtones. Satan, the man with a tongue like a serpent’s, first appears in the text at the witches’ gathering in the woods. Garrity, who explores Warner’s encrypted lesbianism in the text, points out Satan’s effeminate manner: the first time Laura sees him, at the witches’ Sabbath, “she thought that he was a Chinaman” (181). Garrity argues that Warner makes use of the British stereotype that Asian males are effeminate and that Laura’s initial encounter with Satan emphasizes her attraction to the feminine and the Other (173). Other textual details work

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<sup>15</sup> Several critics have argued that the fact that Mrs. Leak and the Lazzard Court sisters (Miss Minnie and Miss Jane) are all witches is code for their lesbianism, and the fact that Laura becomes a witch also symbolizes her lesbianism. Jane Garrity notes that some feminist critics argue that the broomstick serves as “an emblem of female potency” (158), although Warner never mentions such tools of the craft in her text.

well with Garrity's idea that Satan is a feminized figure. For example, the narrator later says that his face "was like the face of a very young girl," and "below it, in the hollow of the girlish throat, she saw a flicker of life, a small regular pulse, small and regular as though a pearl necklace slid by under the skin" (181-82). The reference to a pearl necklace reminds the reader of the pearl necklace that Laura's father gave her when she was an infant to celebrate her femininity, which further characterizes Satan as female in this instance. This "girlish" devil, who approaches Laura at the gathering with "secretive and undulating" movements and later licks her cheek, is perhaps a way for Warner to emphasize the radical nature of Laura's decision to enter into a compact with this sexually ambiguous character. It is a clear departure from heterosexuality and, because Satan is feminized while still being male (and overtly masculine at other times), it also disrupts the male/female dichotomy that is the bedrock of Western civilization.<sup>16</sup>

While the novel depicts lesbianism, it never defines Laura herself as homosexual. In fact, Laura avoids intimate relationships with everybody in the novel. Instead she chooses an intimate relationship with nature, suggesting an alternative sexuality and a new way to affiliate with the nation. Laura's version of the pastoral differs from the traditional English affiliation with landscape because it lacks a moral component and it invokes homosexuality. Standing alone, the descriptions of Laura's interactions with the landscape do not seem, immediately, to convey sexual desire. However, when one considers the multiplicity of other, subtle references to lesbianism in the novel, one can certainly argue that Laura engages in a counter-masculine (not specifically lesbian, however, as Garrity argues) encounter when she interacts with the environment:

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<sup>16</sup> Warner further blurs gender dichotomies through her depiction of Mr. Saunter, the henwife with excellent darning skills.

She knelt down among [the cowslips] and laid her face close to their fragrance. The weight of all her unhappy years seemed for a moment to weigh her bosom down to the earth; she trembled, understanding for the first time how miserable she had been; and in another moment she was released. It was all gone, it could never be again, and never had been.

Tears of thankfulness ran down her face. With every breath she drew, the scent of the cowslips flowed in and absolved her. (135)

This passage reveals that Laura's communion with the landscape around her transcends mere appreciation for pretty and fragrant flowers; her physical response resembles an orgasm and the landscape "absolves" her of her experiences under patriarchy. In order to fully explain how her relationship with nature functions, one must examine the narrator's explanation of why Titus's interactions with the countryside alarm Laura: "Love it as he might, with all the deep Willows love for country sights and smells, love he never so intimately and soberly[sic], his love must be a horror to [Laura]. It was different in kind to hers [. . . ], a possessive and masculine love" (147). Laura, by comparison and by inference, has a selfless love for the landscape and, when she walks outside with her nephew, she feels that "the spirit of the place withdrew itself further from her. The woods judged her by her company, and hushed their talk as she passed by with Titus" (148). Titus loves the landscape "possessively," "like a bull" (143), which connects him with the patriarchal ideology that promotes the accumulation of possessions and wealth, as discussed earlier. Laura now operates under a different ideology, which is precisely what Garrity argues: "Rather than desiring to own the countryside, Laura, who has relinquished everything to come to Great Mop, pursues a more reciprocal relation with

the landscape [. . . ]” (168). Titus’s love for the landscape not only repels Laura, it also interrupts her own selfless communion with nature, which is why she seeks help in order to expel him from her village by making a compact with the devil.

Laura engages in an intimate relationship with the English landscape that one can read as an alternative sexuality, one that positions her against England’s tradition of heterosexuality that facilitates traffic in women. Critics such as Terry Castle and Garrity call it a lesbian relationship; however, Warner takes care to step outside all such labels, as demonstrated, and effectively provides a new mode of living that transcends all categories defined by her culture. When Laura claims a place for herself in the shared cottage in the Chilterns, she fulfills her longing for nature that has needled her all the while she resides at her brother’s home. While sitting by the fire with Caroline and Henry, her mind would often wander “by lonely seaboards, in marshes and fens, or came at nightfall to the edge of a wood” (73). Laura imagines herself at nightfall (never, the reader is told, during the day) approaching these places of transition, or these liminal places, spots that are neither water or land, but both, and neither wood nor clearing, but both. Her focus on these transitional landscapes at nightfall, a time that is neither day nor night, functions as an act of subversion in that it allows her to escape binaries and definitions. She seeks out places that elude definition, at a time that is also undefined, thereby strengthening the argument that she wishes to cast off all boundaries and anything already codified or labeled, whether that be heterosexuality or homosexuality, for example. The transformation that Laura undergoes in *Great Mop* is both material and spiritual, and both changes signal the fact that she rejects imperial patriarchal culture when she leaves Henry. She rejects material possessions produced by capitalism (and by

extension the Empire) when she says, “It is best as one grows older to strip oneself of possessions, to shed oneself downward like a tree, to be almost wholly earth before one dies” (98). Her statement represents a complete overthrow of the Willows tradition as represented by Lady Place and all of its patriarchal (to use the narrator’s own word), material accumulations, including “manservants” and “maidservants.” Stripped of possessions and freed from her brother’s constraints, Laura forms new, more meaningful connections.

Immediately upon arriving at her new home, Laura explores the landscape around her and, from the beginning, the narrator characterizes her relationship with the countryside as reciprocal:

She had not come to Great Mop to concern herself with the hearts of men.  
Let her stray up the valleys, and rest in the leafless woods that looked so  
warm with their core of fallen red leaves, and find out her own secret [. . .  
] Wherever she strayed the hills folded themselves round her like the  
fingers of a hand. (117)

Laura senses that the Chiltern countryside responds to her as an individual, and, once she feels acquainted with the footpaths and woods of her new home, she finds an abandoned well and tosses in her guidebook and map, both patriarchal tools that provide mastery over landscape. Garrity argues that disposing of these guides “represents her rejection of the masculinist bias of formal geography” (161) and that Laura’s communion with the natural world should not be conflated with the traditional affinity that the English imagination, poetic and otherwise, has had with nature, thereby making the relationship subversive. Laura does not idealize the landscape, impose her own values on it, or use it

as a way to depict morality since she clearly embraces amorality by aligning herself with Satan, a pact she and Satan mutually confirm when they encounter each other in the woods after the witches' Sabbath. Traditional Romantic and formalized national associations with the landscape impose a moral component on it, assuming that England's rural places reflect English identity and all that is best about the 'race,' whereas Laura's associations with the landscape do nothing like this, as evidenced by her subversive pact with Satan in which she agrees to serve him in place of God and Christianity, thereby affirming her rejection of Western morality. By engaging in a new way with the landscape, in a way that does not fetishize it as Titus does, for example, Laura revises its place in the national imagination, no longer showcasing it as an emblem of England's best qualities. For Laura, landscape fosters her sense of self rather than serving as the site upon which English national values are projected, values she rejects altogether in the end.

Garrity, who also sees Laura's interactions with the Great Mop environs as coded lesbianism,<sup>17</sup> views Laura's relationship with the natural world as a political argument that seeks to create a space in which lesbianism can exist openly within English culture. Warner, according to Garrity, "regards the invert as a part of nature," and, in doing so, her representation of the lesbian does reflect "profoundly English notions of *the natural*, such as the idea that rural England is constitutive of national identity" (143). Garrity further notes that Warner's use of nature as a traditional locus of English identity represents her efforts to "legitimize the spinster-lesbian entitlement to the nation by associating her with indigenous English values" (163). Garrity's argument, however,

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<sup>17</sup> In "Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction," Terry Castle also argues that *Lolly Willowes* is a lesbian fantasy.



validates the binaries upon which lesbianism depends and overlooks Laura's inclination to escape all binaries, all social definitions, anything that is already codified for her. As Bruce Knoll argues, *Lolly Willowes* breaks down the dualism between aggressiveness and passivity. He continues, "This dualism is couched in terms of a masculine versus a feminine approach to life, neither of which Townsend Warner accepts, because the masculine/feminine opposition in the novel is a creation of patriarchal society" (344). Because the text disrupts this binary construction, the idea that Laura's relationship with the landscape is specifically lesbian loses ground. Through repeated use of ambiguity (in Satan's descriptions and in Laura's sexuality, for example), Warner subtly dismantles the male/female dichotomy and constructions that depend on it. The liminal places that drew Laura earlier in the novel (the marsh, the shore, the edge of the woods) act as symbolic counterparts to Warner's depiction of Satan, who is likewise not one thing or the other, and to Laura who is not sexually one thing or the other. Also, Laura demonstrates no affiliation with anything English in the text except perhaps for tea and scones, and she creates her relationship with the landscape entirely on her own terms, tossing the guidebook, which indicates that she has no desire to associate the pastoral with any "indigenous English values." Anthea Trodd makes the case that Warner's pastoralism stems from her admiration for writers like Crabbe and Hardy, but I, as does Garrity, see it as something quite different. While she may have admired their poetry, Warner's descriptions of landscape are nothing if not subversively political and therefore not at all traditional. Laura seeks a relationship with the landscape that is undefined in the dominant culture.

Another way that Warner hints at new possibilities for living unfettered by the national and imperial agenda is by revising traditional English narratives, primarily Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Jane Marcus argues that Laura's retreat to Great Mop is essentially her search for a pre-patriarchal society in which women can discover their own narratives. She posits that "Central to the concept of female wilderness is the rejection of heterosexuality [. . .] ("Wilderness" 136), and that

Warner realizes that a radical re-visioning of Western culture and literary tradition that expresses and imparts Western values is necessary if women are to come to know themselves and create their own stories [. . .] To escape from the powerful scripts of the patriarchy, a woman must reinterpret what is 'natural'" (196).

Marcus presents Warner's strategies as a return to the past, but that reading casts a primitivist light upon Warner's accomplishments, which I view as altogether forward-thinking and as providing forward momentum, not a retreat, a break-through, not a return.

Warner displaces traditional English texts by revising them to suit her purposes and thus disarms them, dislodging them from the core of English nationalism where they help congeal the heterosexual trope. At the novel's end, Satan tells Laura, "I encourage you to talk, not that I may know all your thoughts, but that you may" (216). Satan validates the power of narrative and positions storytelling as a way of knowing, and Warner's text reconfigures the traditional narratives and reveals new modes of engagement with the nation for Laura and those like her. Warner engages most often and most overtly with the Biblical narrative of Adam and Eve and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, revising and refashioning the seminal story. Barbara Brothers refers to the scene in which

Aunt Emmy tempts Laura to come to India to find a mate, calling it a revision of

*Paradise Lost*:

The scene is a comic reversal of the temptation of Eve. How innocent it is to eat apples. How natural it is for a woman to want to remain single. How unnatural and sinful are the imperialistic values of the English patriarchal society recalled by the reference to India. In the scene, Warner challenges what Milton and his progeny depict as the intended order of things. (203)

Warner incorporates the freighted fruit again toward the end of the novel when Satan asks Laura for an apple, saying, "I'll have one of your apples if I may. They are a fruit I am particularly fond of" (211). As Brothers notes, eating apples is perfectly natural, and they are merely fruit in the novel rather than weighted with sin and blame as they are in

*Paradise Lost*.

Warner removes the taint of sin from the apple and absolves Eve of the responsibility for causing the fall of man. By rewriting Eve's pivotal role in human history and removing the messages of temptation and sin, Warner dislodges one of the patriarchy's key messages, which, as Brothers argues, has political implications:

*Paradise Lost* [is] Milton's and the patriarchy's epic. It undergirds Western society's subjection of women, the weaker vessel, and provides the justification for limiting women's access to education, restricting their voting privileges [and] allowing them little control over their own personal, political, and economic lives. (207)

If *Paradise Lost* provides justification for the way England treats its women, then by revising the narrative, Warner loosens its political and cultural grip. Warner unravels the

traditional story again in the passages about Laura's interest in Mr. Saunter, the henwife. Laura admits to having "unladylike curiosity" about Mr. Saunter, who reminds her of Adam, and she fights her curiosity to ask others about him. Laura exhibits restraint and leaves Adam in peace, simply happy to have met him (121). Apples pose no threat and Laura, who acts as Eve in these passages, feels no need to bother Adam. What Brothers does not point out in her argument is that the story of Adam and Eve as relayed in *Paradise Lost* also restricts men's lives, and Warner's revisions create space for men like Mr. Saunter, formerly a bank-clerk and a soldier,<sup>18</sup> who prefers the solitude among his fowl to the masculine pursuits and characteristics that were prescribed to him before he left the city. Warner revises the paradigm and allows Mr. Saunter and Laura freedom to live according to his or her own wills and desires and not according to a pre-ordained set of gender-appropriateness.

Warner subverts traditional associations with the English landscape, traditional sexual relationships, traditional narratives, all in an effort to find freedom for Laura. Laura, anti-imperial, anti-Christian, anti-social, and amoral, finds herself happy alone, with a vision of the multitudes of other women like her all across the country, alone in their homes but communing in spirit. As Laura tells the devil, "It's like this. When I think of witches, I seem to see them all over England, all over Europe, women living and growing old, common as blackberries, and as unregarded" (211). Divested of the trappings of nation and refusing to give credence to the constructions of nation, she stakes out a little patch of England for herself, only herself. She tries to see the world

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy Fortune of *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* is, like Mr. Saunter, a former bank-clerk. Warner links the national economy with traditional notions of gender distinction.

around her as transcending the time and space in which the nation lives. For example, while working in the warehouse during the war, she sees a propaganda poster:

The ruddy young man and his Spartan mother grew pale, as if with fear, and Britannia's scarlet cloak trailing on the waters bleached to a cocoa-ish pink. Laura watched them discolor with a muffled heart. She would not allow herself the cheap symbolism they provoked. Time will bleach the scarlet from young men's cheeks, and from Britannia's mantle. But blood was scarlet as ever. (63-64)

She sees a real body, not the pieces of bodies Aunt Emmy sees, and she sees beyond the confines of national rhetoric. For her, the blood is real, unlike the image of Britannia and her son, which is a manipulation served up for the purpose of mobilizing national sentiment in support of a war. She learns to see that the nation's and the Empire's enterprises are mutable and therefore fallible. Towards the novel's end, Laura thinks:

Not one of the monuments and tinkering of man could impose on the satanic mind. The Vatican and the Crystal Palace, and all the neat human nest-boxes in rows, Balham and Fullham and the Cromwell Road—[the devil] saw through them, they went flop like card-houses, the bricks were earth again, and the steel girders burrowed shrieking into the veins of earth, and the dead timber was restored to the ghostly groves. Wolves howled through the streets of Paris, the foxes played in the throne-room of Schonbrunn, and in the basement at Apsley Terrace, the mammoth slowly revolved, trampling out its lair. (208)

The constructions that nations make are temporary, and the bricks will return to earth again. No longer living the life that best suits the nuclear family and thus the nation and the British Empire, Laura sees the ways in which she had been marginalized and used as a wheel in the “mechanism.” By extracting herself from the practices, institutions, and narratives that impede her autonomy, she finally finds meaningful affiliation with the landscape around her, revising the traditional English Romantic association and forging her own path, one that does not rely on conventional notions of morality. Once hunted, she now roams peacefully, even with the devil beside her.

## II

### ***MR. FORTUNE’S MAGGOT***

*Yes, parrot! You may well whistle. But be careful. Don’t attract my attention too much lest I should make a pet of you, and put you in a cage, and then in the end, when you had learnt to talk like me instead of whistling like a wise bird, wring your neck because you couldn’t learn to repeat Paradise Lost.*

--Reverend Timothy Fortune

*It is only for a week or two that a broken chair or a door off its hinges is recognized as such. Soon, imperceptibly, it changes its character, and becomes the chair which is always left in the corner, the door which does not shut.*

--Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Salutation*

### Homosexual Desire as Resistance to the National Imperative

Warner wrote her third novel with her eye to the Pacific, or so one might think. Even though she set *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*<sup>19</sup> on a fictitious Polynesian island called Fanua, however, Warner's critical eye rested firmly on her native isle all the while. This text, which she published only one year after *Lolly Willowes*, has a simple structure—it is short, has no chapters or other division, and features only a few turns of plot—yet it depends upon the same complex network of ideas that her debut novel lays bare, including the connections established between heterosexuality, patriarchy, nation, and empire. By setting this text abroad, however, Warner extends her critique to include the primitivist ideology inherent in colonialism. While Warner seems to have admired and championed her first protagonist, Laura Willowes, she mocks her second, Mr. Timothy Fortune, and even said to a friend about his story, “I roar with laughter at it and write on feverishly” (qtd. in Rigby 229). The text pokes fun at Reverend Timothy Fortune because of his nationalist and imperialist behavior on the island and through ironic treatment of his homosexual feelings towards his one convert. Fortune learns to see how destructive his possessive, patriarchal, imperial attitudes have been. The narrator, in turn, comes to admire Fortune as he relinquishes his ethnocentrism and admits that he has learned more from his “convert” than the convert learned from him.

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<sup>19</sup> After the dedication to the text, Warner provides the following definition of maggot: “A whimsical or perverse fancy; a crotchet.”

On one level, then, the narrative appears to be divided into two parts: the time before the earthquake that facilitates Fortune's epiphany and the time after. Before he undergoes the internal change brought about by the quake, the Reverend, who worked in Lloyds Bank before he began a career in the church, demonstrates unabashed patriarchal behavior that seems rooted in the desire to possess (and familiarity with the Willowes men makes the reader more acutely aware of how the desire to possess is connected with patriarchy in Warner's point of view). When Fortune imagines his new life as a missionary on the remote island, "he liked to think of the islanders dancing and singing. It would be a beautiful estate to live among them and gather their souls as a child gathers daisies in a field" (138). This sentiment reveals Fortune's objectification of the natives through the comparison of their souls to goods to be gathered for his satisfaction. It also clearly expresses his sense of ownership that accompanied English missionaries, believing themselves superior to native people and entitled to impose their world view. He also likens his work of gathering people's souls to child's play, which is unsettling given that one would imagine that the business of soul-gathering should be a more adult affair, more sacrosanct. Fortune arrives on the island with this care-free, possessive attitude and, when he says goodbye to the crew who carries him over, the narrator describes Fortune as already feeling perfectly at home in the new territory:

[ . . . ] when he stood on the beach waving farewell to the launch he had the sensations of a host, who from seeing off his guests turns back with a renewed sense of ownership to the house which the fact of their departure makes more deeply and dearly his. Few hosts indeed could claim an ownership equally secure. (141)



Fortune thus expresses expansionist and exploitative imperial impulses that seek to possess foreign lands and people, and his behavior once he establishes himself on the island is no different. After about a year in residence there, Fortune awakens after a nap late one afternoon and notices that his lamp illumines everything around him:

It shone as though with kindness upon everything that was dear to him:  
upon his books and the harmonium; upon the bowls and dishes and  
woven mats that were both dear in themselves and as tokens of the  
islanders' good-will, and endeared by use; upon the wakeful shine of the  
teapot and the black tin box, and upon Lueli's sleepy head. (167)

The list of things he holds "dear" encompasses everything in his hut; and, by including Lueli's head in the list, he objectifies him and adds him to his inventory of possessions. Lueli is his one 'convert.' On his first day on the island, Fortune kneels to pray, closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, Lueli, a local adolescent, is kneeling beside him. Mistaking his posture for conversion, Fortune thinks of Lueli as his first convert whom God sent to him. From that point forward, Lueli shares Fortune's hut and helps him to procure food, teaches him to swim, etc., and performs the outward motions of Christian worship alongside the Reverend, while continuing to worship his own idol. Fortune mistakes appearances for reality and fails to understand that his convert is more complex than he thinks, just as he fails to account for the third dimension when cutting clothing for him.

Fortune's sense of ownership aligns him with England's long history of imperialism, and Warner illustrates through him how the process of hegemony works. Warner mocks his efforts to bring people into alignment with the dominant culture by

incorporating an amusing scene in which the Reverend decides to make clothes for his convert to signal his internal conversion to Christianity (although Lueli is not converted). His efforts to outfit Lueli in his idea of suitable clothing falls short because, when tracing the pattern for his pants on the cotton, Fortune fails to account for the depth of his legs, which results in an “unfortunate garment” (177) that would not fit even the slimmest boy. The clothing makes both Lueli and Fortune look silly, and the latter at least has the sense to be embarrassed by his efforts to bring Lueli’s outward appearance into conformity.

Fortune, through homosexual attraction, realizes that his imperial gaze has caused him to misjudge his prospective converts and he learns instead to value the native way of life and to stop trying to alter it according to his vision. Before this recognition, however, the narrator makes clear that the Reverend’s motives for moving to Fanua are decidedly imperialist in nature as he desires to spread his Christian beliefs to those he views as inferior; however, through the implied consummation of a sexual relationship between the missionary and convert, the Reverend reforms himself, ironically. Fortune feels a sexual attraction towards Lueli almost immediately after meeting him. The text makes clear that Lueli, the village pet, is especially liked in his community for his “beauty and amiability” (148), and the narrator provides numerous clues to Fortune’s homosexual desire for him: For example, “Mr. Fortune admired the fish and admired the fruit; but inwardly he admired Lueli more, this beautiful young man smelling of the sea” (188); and “So his passion whisked him round again, and he was angrier than ever with Lueli because he was also angry with himself for being ridden by what was little better than an infatuation, unworthy of a man and far more unworthy of a missionary” (153-54). Fortune also has a singular aversion to the group of young girls who live on the island, a

group he likens to “a pack of wolves,” “a swarm of mosquitoes,” and “a horde of Tartars” (150), which highlights all the more his attraction to Lueli.

Attracted though he is, Fortune has trouble engaging in a physical relationship with his ‘convert,’ as best demonstrated by his repeated refusals to allow the boy to oil him (oiling is a regular practice on the island, the narrator notes). Fortune makes up elaborate excuses why he cannot be oiled, a process that he characterizes as “effeminate” and “messy” (183), but he experiences nothing short of ecstasy when he finally yields. When Fortune sprains his knee jumping off a rock, “he welcomed the pretext [to be oiled] with feelings intricately compounded of relief and *apostasy*” (emphasis mine). Warming to Lueli’s touch, “By the end of six months he was stretching himself out for Lueli’s ministrations as methodically as when in the old days at the corner of Hornsey Parade he offered one foot and then the other to the boot-black.” Fortune’s skin becomes supple, and “somehow his expression had changed” (184), which signals an internal change. As soon as the Reverend allows himself to be oiled, he begins to feel a “considerable amount of esteem” for his ‘flock’ because he sees the “extraordinarily good hand they made at the business of living,” and he feels “some diffidence in his mission to teach them to do better” (186). By consenting to a physical engagement with Lueli, Fortune becomes less of an imperialist and more appreciative of racial and ideological difference as he learns to understand the depth and sincerity of Lueli’s beliefs. The text presents homosexuality as a kind of ‘antidote’ to patriarchal imperialism by undermining its traditional heterosexual framework. The narrator’s use of the word “apostasy” to describe Fortune’s response to Lueli’s touch announces his renunciation of his former Christian imperialist beliefs and his subsequent submission to Lueli’s physical attention signifies that he embraces his

homosexual feelings in their place. The moment Fortune's homosexuality finds an outlet in the oiling, his imperial mission falters, indicating that imperialism relies on heterosexuality.

The process of "apostasy" that the oiling begins comes to its terminus approximately one year later, during the earthquake and subsequent volcanic eruption that bring about Mr. Fortune's epiphany. Lueli's "ministrations," which have clear sexual overtones, initiate the homosexual relationship between the missionary and his convert and bring about the change in Fortune's outlook on the natives, but he continues to try to collect their souls and show them how to worship his Christian God. He fully abandons his imperialist ways, however, after the natural disaster on the island that seems, in the narrator's descriptions of it, remarkably like the sex act. I argue that the earthquake serves as metaphor for Fortune and Lueli's sexual activity. First, consider the suggestive language the narrator uses to describe the disaster as he and Lueli sit "holding on to each other" while they await the end of the quake:

The shocks were now coming so continuously that it was scarcely possible to say when one followed another [. . .] He sat with his eyes shut, for so he could both feel and hear more unmitigatedly. At intervals he looked out seaward for the coming of the tidal wave. But the sea was always calm [. . .] 'Yet it must come,' he told himself, 'It is certain to come.' And after a terrific shock, accompanied by sounds of rending and shattering as though the whole island were splitting asunder, he thought certainly: 'It will come now [. . .] (199-200)

Garrity, referring to an earlier description of the earthquake in which Lueli and Fortune, running for high ground, are tossed by the earth “as though they were being tossed in a blanket” (198), argues that the quake is an “eroticized interlude that simulates a sexual encounter” (146), and one can also argue that the “shocks” and ensuing “tidal wave” mentioned in the above passage connote Fortune’s orgasm. But what is significant about this is not so much the representation of sex as is the subsequent self-revelation that it engenders in Fortune.

The oiling leads to a partial change in outlook for Fortune and the “earthquake” causes him to understand the futility of his imperial endeavor. He says that, just as Lueli lost his god in the fires that the earthquake causes, he, too, lost his god in the disaster and, along with it, the belief in his right to inhabit the island:

It seemed ungentlemanly to have such a superior invulnerable God, part of that European conspiracy which opposes gunboats to canoes and rifles to bows and arrows, which showers death from the mountains upon Indian villages, which rounds up the Negro into an empire and tricks him of his patrimony. (207)

After the earthquake that symbolizes homosexual eroticism and robs both the Christian man and the native boy of their gods, Fortune sees the connection between his behavior and that of the Europeans who conquered other territories throughout modern history. Nigel Rigby argues similarly that “[. . .] Fortune finally understands that not only does European colonization succeed through the destruction of colonial difference, but that Europe is also destroying itself through its intolerance” (230). As a marker of his ‘conversion,’ Fortune fashions a new idol to replace Lueli’s lost one.

The Reverend Fortune's reformation does not mean, however, that he remains on the island happily coexisting with the Fanuans. Although initially he "goes native [. . .] and eventually comes to relish living outside time and history—just like the other natives" (Garrity 145), soon after the earthquake he decides to leave forever. Fortune recognizes how destructive the British patriarchal and imperial attitudes that underpinned his missionary work are, recognizing them as the "maggot" referenced in the novel's title. He also realizes that he will always be outside of the culture he has come to love and thinks to himself:

For the day must come when a man turns from the companionship of flesh and blood [. . .] and seeks back into the traditions of his race for a companionship more ghostly and congenial—old habits, old beliefs, old stories—the things his childhood accepted and his forefathers lived by.  
(249)

Fortune decides to trade his position among the islanders for the "old habits" and "old beliefs" of his forefathers, and yet, when the boat carries him away from the island, he thinks, as the island shrinks in the distance, "Everything that was real, everything that was significant had gone down with the Island of Fanua and was lost forever" (263). Aboard the boat he decides not to return to Europe after all and the novel's final image (as far as it projects into the future) is of Fortune at sea, with no place to go.<sup>20</sup>

While Warner clearly criticizes Fortune's imperial mission and its primitive foundations, critics argue that she nevertheless reproduces primitive viewpoints. Wachman argues that Warner "problematized but also participated in the primitivism of

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<sup>20</sup> Warner wrote a sequel to *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, a novella called *The Salutation* in which Fortune surfaces in South America, penniless and dejected.

her culture (and ours)” (98), and, according to Garrity, the narrative is “complicit in reproducing the very stereotypes it seeks to disavow” (144). By relying on a young Polynesian man and the lush, “wild,” Polynesian setting to facilitate Mr. Fortune’s homosexuality, Warner engages in a form of what Robin Hackett calls “Sapphic Primitivism,” which she describes as the practice white authors make of using, both intentionally and unintentionally, a “(homo)sexual subtext and stereotypical dark and working-class bodies” (9). The dominant form of primitivism in English imperial history focuses heavily on native desire, and colonial narratives almost always characterize those with darker skin as highly sexual and lacking restraint. Hackett argues that “scientific” studies in the late Victorian period and early-twentieth century helped to formulate and circulate the idea that people of dark races were hypersexual, and writers in the Modern period often used images of dark bodies as a sign of homosexuality. Lueli’s presence in *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* as the dark-skinned boy who smells of the ocean serves in many ways as the sign of the Reverend’s homosexuality, which, as Wachman and Garrity argue, implicates Warner as a participant in the racist ideology that Hackett describes. Rigby notes, however, that “the primitive elements in her work are simply a product of Warner’s modernism” (243). However, one can argue that both of these critics miss the mark, because Warner turns the notion of the native as hypersexual on its head by depicting the missionary as the only one who displays desire and sexuality. Lueli displays no evidence of sexual urge in the text, nor do the few other natives that appear on the pages. Even if the mechanism that Warner uses to critique English imperialism in *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* contains latent racism, the text’s overall theme of anti-imperialism works to expose the racist underpinnings of Fortune’s endeavor. Finally, these critical

readings also overlook the fact that Fortune ceases to practice the activities that Warner criticizes. Even if Warner is complicit in reproducing portions of imperial thinking, she still manages to effectively mock the ethnocentricity and the primitivism manifest in the Christian imperial mission.

## CONCLUSION

These two novels take arms against English imperial nationalism in the late 1920's by featuring characters who learn to see that the categories of identity assigned to them have their source in imperial practices that rely on the subjugation of colonial bodies. Both texts examine the specific ways in which the British imperial nation formulates categories of race, class, and gender in ways that have become so naturalized that they are not always immediately visible. Once these characters see beneath the surface of their culture, they reject the lives they once led. Laura seeks to escape the confines of an imperial economy that capitalizes on colonial natives and resources and defines gender roles according to what benefits the nation. Laura finds satisfaction in her autonomy, which she secures by rejecting Western binaries and traditional English values. She prefers ambiguity and liminality in the same way that she prefers the seashore and the forest's edge, borderlands without clear definition. Her unique values manifest themselves in her relationship with the landscape that she prizes for its authenticity. She does not impose her will on the landscape of Great Mop, tossing her guidebook that



represents patriarchal imperial control. Escaping the national imperial culture her brother's house represents, she refuses to impose those same strictures on her environs. Fortune also abandons imperial culture when he walks away from his mission that objectifies colonial natives. His homosexual desire allows him to see his "flock" as human and not goods for his own mission. Fortune packs up and heads home alone, leaving the natives of Fanua as he found them, free from the imposition of British imperialism.

# Conclusion

*“We are coming to those other writers who have got into literature by the pantry window, and who have left the most illustrious footprints on the windowsill.”*

--Sylvia Townsend Warner<sup>21</sup>

The arguments presented in this dissertation feature texts that critics often discuss in terms of their relationship to modernism, or evaluate through a feminist lens that focuses on the strictures of patriarchy, but those discussions have generally obscured what I argue is their greatest cultural value: their articulation of the ways in which domesticity, the institution of marriage, and gender roles in the middle-class English home in this period are informed by the “dark, abiding, signing” presence of the colonial Other.

Critics have also largely overlooked how the main characters’ desire for autonomy launches a direct critique of the imperial nation and the axiomatics of British imperialism. To examine these texts in terms of their connections to the Empire answers Said’s call to consider literature in terms of its historical context. As he argues,

To lose sight or ignore the national and international context of, say, Dickens’s representations of Victorian businessmen, and to focus only in the internal coherence of their roles in his novels is to miss an essential

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<sup>21</sup> From “Women as Writers,” reprinted in Bonnie Kime Scott’s *The Gender of Modernism* (544).

connection between his fiction and his historical world. And understanding that connection does not reduce or diminish the novels' value as works of art: on the contrary, because of their *worldliness*, because of their complex affiliations with their real setting, they are *more* interesting and *more* valuable as works of art. (13)

Empire was an integral part of the historical period in which the novels addressed in this dissertation were written, and they, as Said claims, are more valuable when their connection to that history is laid bare. Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, have analyzed nineteenth-century English texts in terms of their hidden, historical connections to the Empire. Spivak, in her analysis of *Jane Eyre*, argues that "It is the active ideology of imperialism that provides the discursive field" in which Jane constructs her feminist individualism (899). This dissertation sharpens the focus Said and Spivak formulate and moves it into the early-twentieth century, demonstrating how historical connections to empire enable the use of the middle-class, white, English woman's body in the period around World War I as a marker of national values and how. Women authors and their characters have run counter to the national imperative by articulating autonomy instead of affiliating themselves with imperial gender roles.

Woolf, West, and Warner invoke the colonial Other to demonstrate how the category of the white, English, middle-class woman is constructed in the period during World War I and the decade following. Additionally, references to the imperial economy and imperial tropes of behavior in each novel illustrate the connection between middle-class English women and the Empire, both as its supporters (materially and culturally) and as its subjects. The different outcomes for each main character reflect the changing

historical climate in England from 1915 to 1927. Each author uses lesbianism or homosexuality as a part of her narrative strategy to critique imperial, patriarchal traditions during a period when such sexual categories were highly censored. The lesbian and homosexual were sites of national anxiety, perpetuated in part by politicians such as Noel Pemberton Billing; their behavior was classified as treasonous because they were thought to be apt to spread national secrets during war time. Writing about lesbianism was punishable by law and meant profound social stigma. Woolf began her debut novel in 1908 and revised it many times (Tvordi 227). The novel's early drafts feature more overtly lesbian content than the final draft does, and Patricia Juliana Smith notes that, "Given the legal restrictions and social inhibitions of the time, such self-censorship is surely understandable" (29). Woolf wrote subversive material in a hostile environment and the stakes were high. The final version of *The Voyage Out* is therefore heavily coded. The only sexual displays in the novel are a few kisses between men and women, and lesbianism is hidden within symbols such as candied ginger.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Rachel resolves her conflict with imperial nationalism through her death instead of a realization of the autonomy she wants. Woolf's critique of empire lies deep within the subtext and her heroine slips quietly, unobtrusively out of the way. In fact, Woolf obscured her themes so well that her contemporary critics miss them altogether.

West, who published her novel a few years after *The Voyage Out*, makes her critique slightly more visible. Perhaps the opportunities the war afforded women gave West more room to confront polarizing gender roles, but she nevertheless ends her novel with the reinstatement of normalcy. West provides an unambiguous depiction of sexuality

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<sup>22</sup> Alone with Rachel in her room, Miss Allan offers her candied ginger from a jar in a sexualized manner, saying that, "If you put your finger into this jar you may be able to extract a piece of preserved ginger," and that, by trying it, she "may add a new pleasure to life" (264).

between women when Jenny and Margaret kiss “as lovers do,” but she backs away from its implications by returning Chris’s memory, citing the importance of patriotism and normalcy during war time and thereby endorsing national interests and their reliance on heterosexuality. With the stakes still high, West chose to privilege the nation and its needs during war time more than her desire to depict a heroine who fully embraces ideas that threaten the national structure.

Nearly ten years later, Warner published *Lolly Willowes*, which contains references to lesbianism that one can characterize as more numerous and more overt than those in Woolf’s and West’s texts. The stakes for such content remained high; the obscenity trial involving *The Well of Loneliness* began one year later. But Warner perhaps escaped censure because she never endorses lesbianism specifically in the novel and, instead, dismantles all Western binaries upon which sexual relationships depend. Warner is also the only one of the three novelists who depicts the fruition of her heroine’s search for autonomy in place of affiliation with the imperial nation. West comes closer than Woolf to a subversive ending, but Warner alone closes her text with her main character fully inscribed in an alternative role.

One can also argue that the age of each heroine dictates how fully each author can depict her rejection of national tradition without threat of rebuke. Woolf’s Rachel is the youngest, at 24. West’s Jenny never reveals her age but, assuming she is in the same age-range as Kitty and Chris, she is still in her child-bearing years. Warner’s Laura is 47 when she moves to Great Mop. Rachel, then, has the most to offer the nation in terms of her body; she has many years in which she can produce white, middle-class English children. Even though Jenny expresses no plan to marry and she is presumably past the

typical marriageable age, she could still possibly serve in her cousin's household helping to raise any other children who might come along. Laura, on the other hand, who is past her child-bearing years, has no value to the nation any longer, not even as a helpmate in her brother's household since his children are now grown. Her departure from patriarchal, imperial systems poses the smallest threat to England because the nation loses no valuable assets or services when it loses her. Thus, Woolf's heroine is the only one squarely in the crosshairs of national interest and removing her from the traffic in women, to borrow Gayle Rubin's phrase, would be dramatically more subversive than Laura Willowes' break with national imperial culture. While the years between the publication of Woolf's and Warner's novels may have opened up a little more cultural and political elbow room in which to write, one cannot overlook the difference in the main characters' ages and its significance within the imperial nation when accounting for the dramatic differences in the novels' endings. In sum, Woolf, West, and Warner each depict characters who object to the gender roles the imperial nation provides them. By illuminating how those roles are constructed within the intersections of race, class, and gender in the shadow of imperial practice, each text provides rich material for postcolonial feminist scholars and for scholars interested in English nationalism.

Examining literature written from the center during this period also enriches conversations that seek to address what happens in the metropole in the colonial relationship. These texts by Woolf, West, and Warner foreground the ways in which their middle-class, English heroines have internalized imperial ideology, such as primitivism and racism. The texts reveal that England relies on its women to support the Empire through consumerism, a commitment to marriage and domesticity, and child-bearing. The

imperial nation also expects its middle-class women to reproduce and reinforce imperial practices at home, practices such as primitivism, the use of English literature as a tool for indoctrination, and the material exploitation of others.

As subjects of the Empire whose indoctrination begins in the cradle, the women featured in each text reflect the conflicted feelings of each author herself. Woolf, as Julia Briggs notes, “celebrated those aspects of ‘Englishness’ that were linked with a sense of the past, even while deploring the more sinister sides of nationalism” (99). While academic dialogues have mapped out the general themes present in *The Voyage Out*, much of the criticism swivels on binary opposition, casting Woolf’s novels as either feminist or complicit with patriarchy, for example, or as anti-colonial or in support of the Empire. Recognizing this, Pamela L. Caughie and Andrea Lewis have encouraged studies that move away from these “rigid dualities” (Lewis, “Visual Politics” 107). Lewis notes that critics tended to see Woolf’s texts as written either from an insider’s perspective or an outsider’s:

what we seem to be left with is the need to acknowledge the concurrent inside/outside positions that Woolf’s work occupies. And I would suggest that we read these not as a contradiction but as a reflection of the powerful social divisions embedded in the British empire and thus an inevitable part of any cultural text produced from within the empire at that time. (Lewis 119)

Mike Wollaeger and others have produced such nuanced critiques that recognize Woolf’s texts as often contradictory or, as he describes them, “more complicated than a straightforward critique of empire” (44). I have shown how each text perpetuates national

nostalgia and imperial racism in some ways while critiquing these in other ways. I argue that the ambiguity is not a riddle to be solved but rather key to understanding how deeply rooted imperial nationalism is in this period. English citizens are raised on a deep reverence for country and respect for empire and, while Woolf, West, and Warner may critique its function in the lives of English women, they nevertheless are products of the Empire themselves and affiliate themselves with many of its aspects.

To conclude, I would like to call attention to a theme that runs quietly through many women's texts in England, over a span of at least one hundred years. In my study of English literature by women, I have noticed the abundance of images of women in windows and doorways. Jane Eyre hides to read in a breakfast room window. Rachel Vinrace has an epiphanic moment as she watches women in the courtyard kill chickens from a window above. West's heroine regularly spies from the manor house windows, and once she references a "slut" who "sits at the door of a filthy cottage" (66). Laura Willowes speaks to Satan about women in England, saying, "Doing, doing, doing, till mere habit scolds them [. . .] and rouses them up—when they might sit in their doorways and think—to be doing still!" (213). Doris Lessing writes about Ella, who "found herself dressed and made-up [. . .] standing at the window looking down into the street" (*The Golden Notebook* 215). Although Eavan Boland is Irish, her poem "Anna Liffey," which repeats several times the line "A woman in the doorway of a house," dovetails here nicely and brings this project back to where it began: with a depiction of a woman on the periphery of her culture, passive, contained by domesticity or standing at its threshold. Woolf's, West's, and Warner's texts take aim at the windows and doorways and thus make strides in opening them up. In a 1912 edition of *The Daily Herald*, West argues that



the Women's Social and Political Union's window-smashing tactics, orchestrated as part of the fight for suffrage, might work better if they tried to smash them from the inside. Certainly her comment is more metaphorical than literal. Debra Rae Cohen argues that "The ending of *The Return of the Soldier* underscores just how hard just how hard such window-smashing from the inside really is; one may achieve glimpses through the glass without being able to shatter the pane, to break out of the constrictive enclosure" (83). Although a difficult task, these novelists managed to crack the windows enough that they should be considered ground-breaking figures who opened up possibilities for future writers and for real women living within the national imperial culture that would rather keep the windows intact.

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